

Babel's Tower Translated

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Babel's Tower Translated

Genesis 11 and Ancient Jewish Interpretation

By

Phillip Michael Sherman



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כֵּן אַתָּה מוֹצֵא שְׂכָל דְּבַר שְׂאֲדָם
נוֹתֵן נַפְשׁוֹ עָלָיו וְנִקְרָא עַל שְׁמוֹ

Mekhilta, Shirta 35

For Suzanne, Kitely, and Emory
Who humble me in being called by my name.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ArBib	Aramaic Bible
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
ALGHJ	Arbeiten zur Literatur und Geschichte des hellenistischen Judentum
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation
BibOr	Biblica et orientalia
BBR	Bulletin for Biblical Research
BEATAJ	Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentum
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
CC	Continental Commentaries
CSCO	Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium
DJD	Discoveries in the Judean Desert
HTR	Harvard Theological Review
HUCA	Hebrew Union College Annual
JAAR	Journal of the American Academy of Religion
JAOS	Journal of the American Oriental Society
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JBQ	Jewish Bible Quarterly
JJS	Journal of Jewish Studies
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review
JR	Journal of Religion
JSJ	Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods
JSJSup	Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods Supplemental Series
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplemental Series
JSP	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha
JSPSup	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigraph, Supplemental Series
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NedTT	Nederlands theologisch tijdschrift
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OtSt	Oudtestamentische Studiën
OTL	Old Testament Library
PVTG	Pseudepigrapha Veteris Testamenti Graece

SBLAcBib	Society of Biblical Literature Academia Biblica
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLRBS	Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Studies
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
SVTP	Studia in Veteris Testamenti pseudepigrapha
StPB	Studia post-biblica
SPhilo	Studia philonica
TBN	Themes in Biblical Narrative
TSAJ	Texts und Studien zum antiken Judentum
VT	Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WGRW	Writings from the Greco-Roman World
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

The story of Babel is more than an archaeological report (say, on the Babylonian ziggurat); more than an etiological theory (on the diversity of languages and on the name Babel/Babylon); more than a historical reminiscence (about the Babylonian melting pot of the 6th century BCE); and, needless to say, more than entertainment. Genesis 11 speaks to our *imagination*. It belongs to *mythos*.

André LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist*, 69.

INTRODUCTION

INTERPRETATION AS TRANSLATION OR EXEGESIS AND HISTORICAL HERMENEUTICS

... isn't translating necessarily a utopian task?¹

Babel is ubiquitous. The biblical narrative (Gen 11:1–9) of the ancient construction of the tower on the plain of Shinar has drawn the attention of every manner of thinker, ancient and modern, and continues to serve as a malleable symbol for numerous works.² The Tower of Babel has, for many, become synonymous with language, translation or any sort of 'difference' at all.³ If, in the modern period, Gen 11 has offered metaphorical fodder

¹ José Ortega y Gasset, "The Misery and Splendor of Translation," in *The Translation Studies Reader* (ed. Lawrence Venuti; trans. Elizabeth Gamble Miller; London: Routledge, 2000), 49.

² The field of biblical studies makes occasional use of the image: John J. Collins, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); John Kaltner and Steven L. McKenzie, eds., *Beyond Babel: A Handbook for Biblical Hebrew and Related Languages* (SBLRBS 42; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002); John R. Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004); one contemporary ethicist has also utilized the image of Babel, see Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); a philosopher of science has had recourse to the image of Babel in decrying emerging 'Intelligent Design' movements in the United States, see Robert T. Pennock, *Tower of Babel: The Evidence Against the New Creationism* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000); Babel appears in modern discussions of psychological practice, Scott D. Miller, Barry L. Duncan and Mark A. Hubble, *Escape from Babel: Toward a Unifying Language for Psychotherapy Practice* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); Babel is referenced in modern works of fiction: A.S. Byatt, *Babel Tower* (New York: Vintage, 1997) and a famous short story by Jorge Louis Borges, "The Library of Babel," in *Borges: Collected Fictions* (trans. Andrew Hurley; New York: Penguin, 1999), 112–118; Babel has appeared prominently in the history of art, see Helmut Minkowski, *Vermutungen über den Turm zu Babel* (Freren: Luca Verlag, 1991); Babel can serve as partisan political image in Mike S. Adam, *Welcome to the Ivory Tower of Babel: Confessions of a Conservative College Professor* (Augusta, Ga.: Harbour House, 2004); Babel has even made the leap to cyber-space with an on-line journal (<http://www.towerofbabel.com>).

³ The number of linguistics texts which reference Babel is immense. A sampling would include: John McWhorter, *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003); Andrea Moro, *The Boundaries of Babel: The Brain and the Enigma of Impossible Languages* (Current Studies in Linguistics; Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2008); Einar Haugen, *Blessings of Babel: Bilingualism and Language Planning* (Contributions

for discussions of language difference, such was not always exclusively the case.

The short narrative of Babel has had a long and diverse reception history.⁴ Babel has been read as an account of rank rebellion against the divine will, idolatry, an example of humanity's bent to oppress one another, and even as a depiction of primordial war against God. It has also been read as a reflection of fear, a yearning for community, and as a warning against misguided desires for peace. How is it possible that such a short and opaque narrative could attract to itself such multifarious associations? By the most foundational of means: *interpretation*. These interpretations were facilitated by diverse hermeneutical approaches. Just as the builders' language became confused at Babel, so too did later interpreters speak wildly different 'languages' in their interpretive approach to Gen 11:1–9. The intent of the present study is to explore a select number of ancient Jewish interpretations of the narrative of Babel and to become hermeneutically fluent in many of the exegetical languages spoken by these later readers. It is to explore why later interpreters (re)imaged Babel as they did.

Analysis of the history of interpretation of biblical texts (*rezeptionsgeschichte*) has emerged as a field of academic study in its own right.⁵ Recent

to Sociology of Language; New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1987); Gerry T.M. Altman, *The Ascent of Babel: An Exploration of Language, Mind, and Understanding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Closely related is a famous text in translation studies, George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language & Translation* (3d. ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); see also, Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," *Semeia* 51 (1991): 3–34. Repr. from J.F. Graham, ed. and trans. *Difference in Translation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).

⁴ For a discussion of ancient Jewish readings of Babel, see Christoph Uehlinger, *Wel-treich und "eine Rede": Eine Neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbau erzählung (Gen 11,1–9)* (OBO 101; Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 9–290; see more recently, Theodore Hiebert, ed. *Toppling the Tower: Essays on Babel and Diversity* (Chicago: McCormick Theological Seminary, 2004). The most extensive discussion of the Tower of Babel and its place in intellectual history is the six volume work of Arno Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel: Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker* (Stuttgart: A. Hiersemann, 1957–1963).

⁵ A sampling of works in this category would include: Carol Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab* (Judaica: Hermeneutics, Mysticism and Religion; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2006); Daniel Bodi, *The Michal Affair: From Zimri-Lim to the Rabbis* (Hebrew Bible Monographs 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005); Jeremy Cohen, *Be Fertile and Increase. Fill the Earth and Master It: The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989); Steven D. Fraade, *Enosh and His Generation: Pre-Israelite Hero in post-biblical Interpretation* (SBLMS 30; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985); one amongst many by James L. Kugel, *The Ladder of Jacob: Ancient Interpretations of the Biblical Story of Jacob and His Children* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Esther Marie Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics* (JSJSup 51; Leiden: Brill, 1997); Ed Noort

works deploy a variety of metaphors to characterize their examinations of the reception history of particular biblical narratives or works. Tod Linafelt imagines interpretation as an act of 'survival', while Yvonne Sherwood focuses on the 'afterlife' of biblical texts.⁶ The metaphor of choice for the present study is *translation*. Translation, one can argue, would not have been necessary but for the actions of the Babelites. The account of the Tower of Babel, therefore, is a narrative that has required 'translation' from the very beginning. Translation in this context means more than the usual transcription of a text from the vocabulary, syntax, and grammar of one language into another—although that task is complex enough. Rather, I speak principally of translation in its most literal and basic sense: the transference of an object from one location or context to another. The Babel account, like so many biblical characters and narratives, has been translated and transformed as it has moved throughout the interpretive histories of those traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—which treat the Hebrew Bible as sacred text. The plurality and diversity of historical, exegetical, social, and theological contexts in which the Babel narrative was read inescapably has influenced how the narrative has been interpreted. As Babel is translated at various points in Jewish antiquity, the influence of contemporary concerns, events, and controversies leave a mark in the bricks of Babel. Understanding the history of interpretation of Gen 11 requires a deep appreciation for and sustained focus on particular incarnations of the narrative of Babel.

Babel's history of interpretation presents a special set of interpretive issues. There is a consistent assertion in some recent scholarly literature that Babel was misread and misinterpreted at a very early point in its history. Theodore Hiebert argues that Gen 11:1–9 does not deal principally—or at

and Eibert Tigchelaar, eds. *Sodom's Sin: Genesis 18–19 and its Interpretations* (TBN 7; Leiden: Brill, 2004); Karla R. Soumala, *Moses and God in Dialogue: Exodus 32–34 in Postbiblical Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004); Karin Zetterholm, *Portrait of a Villain: Laban the Aramean in Rabbinic Literature* (Interdisciplinary Studies in ancient Religion 2; Leuven: Peeters, 2002). In addition, there are now a proliferating number of reference works which deal with history of interpretation research: John H. Hayes, ed. *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*. 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999); Donald K. McKim, ed. *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2007); and the multi-volume, on-going project by Magne Sæbø, ed. *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996–). Finally, there is the massive current undertaking of *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and the History of Its Reception*, currently in production from Walter DeGruyter press.

⁶ Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

all!—with issues of hubris or rebellion against God—elements which he alliteratively terms the “pride-and-punishment” model of interpretation. All such concerns are foreign to the actual biblical text.

The pride-and-punishment reading of the story of Babel is already firmly fixed in the earliest extant reading of Gen 11:1–9 in the book of *Jubilees* (ca. 200 BCE) ... it has been embraced with little basic variation by both Jewish and Christian exegetes throughout the history of interpretation, and it is still dominant in recent scholarly commentaries on Genesis. Outside of biblical scholarship this reading of the Babel story has been given broad cultural legitimacy in classics such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in many works of art such as Peter Brueghel's masterpiece, and in all children's story Bibles.⁷

Hiebert wishes to overturn this regnant interpretation and present a reading more consonant with what he claims were the aims of the original author. For Hiebert, the narrative of Babel was composed to serve as an etiology explaining the diversity of nations and languages.

[T]he story of Babel ... is exclusively about the origins of cultural difference and not about pride and punishment at all. The story's terminology, explicit claims, and repetitive structure all focus on the tension between singularity and multiplicity with the purpose of explaining the origin and variety of the world's cultures.⁸

It was only later readers of the narrative, fixating on the reference to the tower “with its top in the heavens,” who transformed an etiological narrative and foundational document for human diversity into a narrative of rebellion and sin.⁹ Christoph Uehlinger, another prominent interpreter of Gen 11,

⁷ T. Hiebert, “The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures,” *JBL* 126 (2007): 29. Hiebert has edited a collection of essays by his students which explore the dominant reading. See T. Hiebert, ed. *Toppling the Tower: Essays on Babel and Diversity* (Chicago: McCormick Theological Seminary, 2004).

⁸ Hiebert, “The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures,” 31.

⁹ His attempt to dethrone the dominant reading of the narrative has elicited a number of rejoinders. As will be clear below (chapter one), I agree with much of Hiebert's thesis concerning the meaning of the narrative of Babel. At the same time, the bulk of this work seeks to demonstrate that the negative reading of the Babelites and their building project(s) is not simply the result of an exegetical theme being repeated from generation to generation. The negative evaluation is based on textual data and its interpretation by changing hermeneutical and theological systems. For responses to Hiebert, see John T. Strong, “Shattering the Image of God: A Response to Theodore Hiebert's Interpretation of the Story of the Tower of Babel,” *JBL* 127 (2008): 625–634 and André LaCocque, “Whatever Happened in the Valley of Shinar? A Response to Theodore Hiebert,” *JBL* 128 (2009): 29–41. Strong is certainly sympathetic to Hiebert's argument, but attempts to qualify it by demonstrating that the narrative serves more than an etiological function in the context of the larger Primeval History. LaCocque is much more critical of Hiebert's thesis.

actually holds that a modern, uncritical reliance on the history of ancient interpretation is partly responsible for the continued misprision of Gen 11 in contemporary expository literature. The history of interpretation is a distraction.

Obviously, the history of the interpretation of a text is determined, often substantially, through implied interpolations that are secondary to the text itself. Moreover, the exegetical disciplinary literature oftentimes deals more with referencing exegetical positions and diverse confessional views than with the details of the text at hand.¹⁰

According to this approach, the history of interpretation of Babel has been a *falling away* from the pure language and straightforward meaning of the text.¹¹ The words of Babel have become mixed and enmeshed in the theological and ideological concerns of later generations to such an extent that modern readers must cast off the confusion of the ancient commentators and read the text with new eyes. The history of interpretation must be eclipsed if one hopes to return to Babel.

Without disparaging the modern pursuit of 'original' meaning, I would suggest that ancient interpreters were oftentimes quite subtle readers of biblical narratives themselves. Their own interpretations of biblical texts are not the antithesis to modern, critical study. Rather, in some fashion, they are our exegetical ancestors, pointing to and puzzling over the same interpretive issues that will animate latter-day readers of Babel. They may speak a fundamentally different language than do modern expositors of biblical texts, but they are not of a fundamentally different type. Any attempt to understand Babel—even in its original context—is an attempt to translate the tower in light of modern concerns and by means of modern hermeneutical values.¹² This is always a utopian task! Like any good piece of literature, the tower can never be translated absolutely. Each translation (interpretation) draws on some element(s) of the biblical narrative to the exclusion of others. Thus, Hiebert overstates matters to a significant degree when he claims that "Genesis

¹⁰ "Es liegt auf der Hand, dass die Interpretationsgeschichte eines Textes vielfach wesentlich durch sekundär an den Text herangetragene Interpolationen determiniert wird. Auch die exegetische Fachliteratur gibt sich oft mehr mit dem Referieren von exegetischen Positionen und diversen 'Glaubensbekenntnissen' ab als mit dem Detail der ihr vorgegebenen Texte" (C. Uehlinger, *Weltreich*, 3).

¹¹ In the first section of his monograph (7–290), Uehlinger lays out a brief overview of the ancient Jewish interpretation of Babel before suggesting, in his second section, a new understanding of the narrative of Babel.

¹² The very concern with original meaning and the priority granted historical context is, of course, a historically conditioned approach to reading biblical texts.

11:1–19 is exclusively about the origins of cultural difference.”¹³ The problematic term here is ‘exclusively.’ Every translation is always incomplete; an impossible attempt to replicate in the present some ‘meaning’ bound to the past. There is, finally, no ‘exclusive’ meaning.

Understanding the history of biblical interpretation requires equal attention to both elements of that equation; both *interpretation* and *historical context* must be held together. More directly, interpretation is itself irreducibly an historical act. The interpreter is historically bound and constrained by numerous factors. Carol Bakhos, in her study of the changing depiction of Ishmael in rabbinic literature, has asserted “the issue ... is not whether extratextual factors are part of exegesis but, rather, *how* and *when* we can use them as historical sources.”¹⁴ There has been a tendency, perhaps for fear of charges of historical reductionism, to diminish the importance or relevance of the historical embodiment of exegetical work. Bakhos mentions James Kugel as exemplary of those scholars who have stressed the (purely) exegetical foundation of (rabbinic) interpretation to the exclusion of historical context. She contrasts his view with the approach adopted by a number of other scholars who focus on historical and ideological context as integral for comprehending ancient Jewish biblical interpretation.¹⁵ Bakhos finds something to admire in both approaches.

Kugel has focused on discrete, smaller units of interpretation in order to understand their literary significance as rabbinic interpretation, and in doing so has made a weighty contribution to our understanding of midrash *quo* rabbinic exegesis, and to our knowledge of the reception history and textual transmission of biblical interpretation in the ancient period. [Joseph] Heinemann, on the other hand, has paid closer attention to the historical and cultural aspects of rabbinic exegesis ...¹⁶

Exegetical reductionism is no more preferable than historical reductionism, however.¹⁷ No exegete has ever existed in an historical and cultural vacuum.

¹³ Hibert, “The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World’s Cultures,” 31.

¹⁴ Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border*, 7.

¹⁵ She examines the work of Joseph Heinemann, “The Nature of the Aggadah,” in *Midrash and Literature* (ed. G. Hartman and S. Budick; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 40–65; Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Judaica: Hermeneutics, Mysticism, and Religion; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991); Richard Kalmin, *The Sage of Jewish Society of Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1999); and Christine Hayes, *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds: Accounting for Halakhic Difference in Selected Sugyot from Tractate Avodah Zarah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁶ Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border*, 8.

¹⁷ See the introduction to Part II, below, for a fuller discussion of the work of James Kugel

The current work is an extended argument for a deeper understanding of the indissoluble nature of exegesis and historical context and a rejection of the tendency to perceive a dichotomy between the two. Ancient readers of the story of Babel were making use of exegetical techniques, but they were also *always interpreting in a particular historical context*. These contexts had an impact of their exegetical approach that is undeniable.

Part I introduces the narrative of Gen 11 and demonstrates how the literary and theological context(s) in which the account of Babel is read is essential for understanding its translational possibilities. Chapter One explores the narrative in literary and theological isolation from the remainder of the Hebrew Bible. Chapter Two places Babel in diverse canonical contexts to explore from a modern perspective how the variety of exegetical permutations alters and informs the image of the tower.

Part II is the bulk of the work and provides an analysis of *six separate texts* from the Second Temple period and a discussion of the nature and purposes of rewritten Bible during the Hellenistic period. Chapter Three explores the book of *Jubilees* and its concern with the primordial power of the written word and the abeyance of the sacred language of Hebrew at Babel. The *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo (*L.A.B.*) is the subject of Chapter Four. The author of *L.A.B.* draws on larger (pre-existing) exegetical traditions concerning the narrative of Babel and weaves them together to construct an image of faithfulness in the midst of oppression and internal debate. Josephus and his monumental *Judean Antiquities* are examined in Chapter Five. The Jewish historian translates the tower to offer a warning to his co-religionists following the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple and the dispersion of the Jewish people. Chapter Six shifts to interpretive works composed in the Jewish Diaspora with a focus on the author of 3 (*Greek*) *Baruch*, who provides a bizarre reading of Babel which I will suggest is meant to offer hope to the dispersed people of Israel; a hope that the God of Israel acts consistently in history to punish the oppressors and bring about liberation for his people. Philo of Alexandria and his treatise, *On the Confusion of Tongues*, turn away from the vicissitudes of historical experience in offering an inner, more spiritualized (though politically grounded) translation of the tower. Chapter Seven focuses on Philo's allegorical reading of the tower narrative and the lesson to be applied to every soul who seeks to live by the philosophy of Moses, in contrast to rival philosophical schools.

and how the approach adopted in the present study stands in both continuity and tension with his methodology.

Part III provides an introduction to the hermeneutical language spoken by those responsible for the production of rabbinic midrash. The oldest extant rabbinic commentary on the book of Genesis, *Genesis Rabbah*, is examined in Chapter Eight. Unlike the works explored in Part II, the compilers of *Genesis Rabbah* are mostly concerned with what is communicated about the nature of God in his response to the builders of the Tower of Babel. The justice or justness of God is of ultimate concern.

My focus throughout will be to hold together history and exegesis, interpretation and ideology, as I explore how various interpreters of Scripture in Jewish antiquity, speaking different hermeneutical languages, looked to the narrative of Babel and sought a lesson of pressing importance for the on-going life and well-being of their respective communities. The goal is to translate these translations of the tower.

PART I

UNEARTHING THE TOWER

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

The narrative of the Tower of Babel is built with both superb literary skill and great linguistic economy.¹ Hermann Gunkel once wrote of its “almost excessive conciseness.”² The entire narrative in the original Hebrew contains only one hundred and twenty-one words. When one takes into account the highly repetitious nature of the narrative the brevity is all the more striking. In this brief space, however, the narrative raises numerous unanswered questions which were taken up again and again in later Jewish interpretive texts. *These questions are sites of exegetical activity.* The narrative itself is “fraught with background”—to use a phrase made famous by Erich Auerbach.³ In fact, I would argue (based partially on the evidence of later interpretations of the text) that the narrative is almost completely constituted of background. The Tower serves as narrative scaffolding. Dana Nolan Fewell has speculated that “it is perhaps [the] sparsity [of detail] that encourages biblical scholars to look to contextual and intertextual connections as they build their interpretations of Babel.”⁴ As with all literature, there are many things that a reader might wish to know about this narrative that remain a mystery. The biblical

¹ There have been a number of studies of Gen 11:1–9 from a literary perspective. Key among these is J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975), 11–45; see also Isaac M. Kikawada, “The Rhetorical Shape of Genesis 11:1–9,” in *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (ed. Jared J. Jackson and Martin Kessler; Pittsburg: The Pickwick Press, 1974), 18–32.

² Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Mercer Library of Biblical Studies; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997), 101.

³ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (trans. Willard R. Trask; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3–23. The phrase is used in a famous essay, “Odysseus’ Scar,” in which Auerbach asserts the allusive nature of the biblical account of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son Isaac (the Akedah) in comparison with Homer’s verbose and detailed narrative approach to the revelation of his identity. Auerbach characterizes the biblical prose as follows: “... the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else is left in obscurity; the decisive points alone of the narrative are emphasized, what lies between is non-existent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and fragmentary speeches ...” (11). Auerbach concludes by stating: “the whole ... remains mysterious and ‘fraught with background’” (21).

⁴ Dana Nolan Fewell, “Building Babel,” in *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader* (ed. A.K.M. Adam; St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 2.

account seems to provide only the barest of outlines for a much larger story. Bernhard Anderson has argued that *modern* Jewish and Christian commentators have responded to this ambiguity in quite different ways. He claims:

Christians tend to favor a maximum interpretation; the human beings were motivated by a Promethean impulse to storm the heavens and to be like God. The story portrays human hubris and divine nemesis. A line of Jewish expositors ... advocates a more modest view: the intention of the builders was to gather the people into a centralized location, thereby resisting God's purpose that they should multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it.⁵

There is some truth to this characterization. Anderson is right to point out, however, that while "interpreters inevitably bring something to the text ... it would be an oversimplification to suppose that this 'input' depends on whether one is a Christian or a Jew."⁶ This is true. It would equally be a mistake, however, to suppose that the interpreter's confessional stance has no bearing on their reading of the text. The present study is concerned with the exact nature of what was brought to the story of the tower by various Jewish authors and interpreters in antiquity.

Part I is primarily exegetical in nature. I aim here at a *proleptic exegesis*. I hope to provide readings of Gen 11:1–9 which anticipate and explicate some of the key interpretive moves made in the later reception of the Tower of Babel narrative. Such proleptic exegesis will focus around the above-mentioned sites of exegetical activity. Sometimes repetition, occasionally the presence of seemingly superfluous information, at other times a simple turn-of-phrase or terminological choice will prove to be the foundation for later exegetical expansion. This section seeks to unearth these exegetical foundations. We are engaged in a form of literary archaeology.

As in the excavation of an actual Tel, we must begin with the most recent exegetical dust to accumulate on top of the narrative. Dialogue with major modern readers of Genesis is a key element of the proleptic exegesis just

⁵ Bernard Anderson, "The Tower of Babel: Unity and Diversity in God's Creation," in *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 170–171. P.J. Harland makes a similar point in a recent article: "In Christian tradition the story has been seen as one of human pride, of people wanting to take power from God or to reach heaven. Jewish exegesis has focused more on the theme of dispersion. Instead of wanting to reach heaven, the people were trying to stay in one place and avoid being scattered over the earth" (P.J. Harland, "Vertical or Horizontal: The Sin of Babel," VT 48 [1998]: 515). Harland errs, however, in speaking monolithically. Ancient Jewish interpreters, we shall see, were very concerned with hubris, pride and rebellion—among other things.

⁶ Anderson, "The Tower of Babel," 71.

mentioned. There is a purpose in highlighting recent critical engagement with the narrative. My reading of Babel will engage modern expositors—not to adjudicate critical readings of the passage—but to demonstrate how these interpreters have too often *imposed certainty* on a text that is characterized by ambiguity and, just as importantly, to explore how such interpretive certainty is the result of historical, literary, or theological presuppositions. It is perhaps unfair to criticize commentators for attempting to explicate the meaning of a text. That is what they do! I firmly believe, however, that the story of Babel is more complicated than most modern expositors allow. It is instructive, additionally, to compare the ways modern readers struggle with the same questions and problems which animated earlier biblical interpreters. The major modern commentators are, therefore, granted pride of place within the first chapter. My analysis of their work will focus on *how* these exegetes go about producing their interpretations of Babel as well as how they marginalize other readings.⁷

It would be disingenuous, however, to pretend as though my own reading of Babel is without prejudice. I should confess that I sympathize at some level with the tower builders. I do not believe it is necessary to see the people engaged in any sort of wrong-doing or sin whatsoever. I do see a cadre of commentators intent on assuming the most malicious of motives concerning the builders.⁸ My sympathy has served as a *hermeneutical counter-weight* in my exploration of these modern commentators. It has made me especially sensitive to the ease with which expositors make interpretive assumptions about the builders of Babel. As the remainder of this work seeks to explain how the story of Babel was transformed into an account of overweening

⁷ My dialogue partners include: Bernard Anderson, "The Tower of Babel: Unity and Diversity in God's Creation," 1994; Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part II From Noah to Abraham Genesis VI9-XI32* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1961; repr., Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1972); Samuel R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis: with Introduction and Notes* (Westminster Commentaries; London: Methuen & Co, 1903); Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, 1997; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990); André LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010); Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (trans. John H. Marks; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961); Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001); Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987); Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; CC; Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984). I have attempted to provide a balanced chorus of commentators—Jewish and Christian, more recent and time-tested, strongly confessional and less so.

⁸ An exception to this dominant approach is the above-mentioned Theodore Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," *JBL* 126 (2007): 29–58.

ambition and rebellion against the divine, it is perhaps fitting to demonstrate first how the narrative *can* be read in a less negative light. My argument is that, wherever possible, interpreters have chosen the most damning and dismissive attitudes towards the builders of Babel. Other exegetical options are rarely, if ever, explored.

The meaning of Gen 11 is not stable; it shifts and alters depending on the context in which it is read. Just as one has a very different view standing at the base of a monument than one might have with a vantage some distance away, the literary context in which the tower narrative is read has a strong influence on how the narrative structure appears to the exegete. "Babel is rarely allowed to stand alone," writes Fewell.

Rather, the story is seen to be both the crowning episode in the longer story of Genesis 1–11 and the transition into, indeed the necessity for, the call of Abraham in Genesis 12. Babel's meanings then are not inherent in its own bricks and mortar, but are contingent on how the introductory chapters of Genesis are seen to bear their semantic load.⁹

I would echo Fewell and add, further, that the meaning of the narrative is also contingent upon the larger context of the Hebrew Bible (and, for some interpreters, the New Testament). Thus, in my exegetical work throughout Part I, I am not attempting to present *the interpretation* of this narrative (as if such a goal were possible!), but rather to show the interpretive possibilities provided by the text in its varying contexts. In order to attain a solid picture of the narrative of the Tower of Babel in its different contexts, I propose three perspectives on Gen 11. Each will examine the biblical account in increasingly larger narrative contexts. In the first chapter, I explore the narrative by itself. I term this approach 'Reading without the Canon.' The second chapter, thereafter, is devoted to reading the account of Babel within two broadening literary contexts. The Primeval History (Gen 1–11) and scholarly speculation concerning its larger theological program will be explored in the first part of Chapter Two. Further afield, but no less important, I will explore the larger canon of the Hebrew Bible. What influence does reading Babel in light of the entire Hebrew Bible have on the work of interpretation? The interpretive power of these contexts will both prepare for and enlighten later discussions of Babel in ancient Jewish exegetical literature.

Two additional preliminary topics must be addressed. The *literary unity* of the Babel narrative can be questioned. In fact, it has been consistently questioned. Is it the result of multiple sources which have been woven

⁹ Fewell, "Building Babel," 2.

together by an editor? Is it possible to separate a 'tower-source' and a 'city-source' dealing respectively with language diversification and the spread of humanity? In what follows, I treat the narrative as the work of one hand—the product of one author.¹⁰ My decision to treat the narrative as a unity flows from the literary approach adopted in this section. It is certainly possible that the narrative is an amalgam. Gunkel famously believed that it was possible to separate the narrative into the two sources just mentioned.¹¹ More recently, Uehlinger has proposed an even more complicated history of composition and redaction.¹² While I concede the possibility of such a history for the biblical text, both the brevity and the highly artistic composition of the narrative seem to argue against an overly complicated history of composition. Joel Baden has recently discussed the question of narrative unity. Baden's concern is to highlight and critique the application of modern *literary criticism* (as practiced in various forms by Cassuto, Kikawada and Fokkelman) as it relates to source-critical analysis.¹³ He utilizes the narrative of the Tower of Babel as a test-case. In short: the presence of literary artistry in Gen 11:1–9 occurs at both the macro-level of the narrative itself and in Gunkel's proposed reconstructed sources. A pleasing aesthetic does not, therefore, *necessarily* negate the assertion that multiple sources have been combined at the redactional level. Two well-wrought narratives could conceivably have been combined—forming an extremely well wrought narrative! Literary criticism cannot be used to discredit the possibility of source critical reconstruction. Baden hastens to add: "let me be clear, because I don't want to be accused of anything later: I don't agree with Gunkel either.

¹⁰ Ultimately the whole question of author vs. authors is irrelevant for this study as I am primarily concerned with the *readers* of Babel.

¹¹ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 94–102.

¹² Christoph Uehlinger, *Weltreich und "eine Rede": Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerschaft (Gen 11, 1–9)* (OBO 101; Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 293–584. Uehlinger suggests that the current narrative went through four separate redactions. His approach to the narrative has largely been rejected. One commentator offered equal measure praise for the work and criticism of the result. "The resulting edifice of this book, to my mind, is much like the Tower of Babel of the biblical narrative. A prodigious amount of learning and labor has been expended, but to what avail? The arguments are girded by dubious conjectures, and the logical structure is unsound. Yet U[ehlinger]'s researches into early biblical interpretation, archaeology, modern biblical criticism, Sumerian literature, and neo-Assyrian imperial ideology are often models of critical erudition. The density of learning is admirable, even if the arguments about Gen 11:1–9 fail to persuade" (Ronald S. Hendel, review of *Weltreich und "eine Rede": Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerschaft (Gen 11, 1–9)* in *CBQ* 55 [1993]: 787).

¹³ See Joel Baden, "The Tower of Babel: A Case Study in the Competing Methods of Historical and Modern Literary Criticism," *JBL* 128 (2009): 209–224.

There is no doubt in my mind that Genesis 11:1–9 was composed as a literary unit.¹⁴ Literary criticism, however, cannot always be used as a strong argument against source-critical analysis.

A second issue is historical in its concern. I will not attempt to uncover the historical background of the tower narrative. An earlier generation of scholars was especially concerned with identifying the historical referents or background for the Tower of Babel. (Babel, unlike many of the other narratives in the Primeval History, was not easily amenable to ancient Near Eastern comparative analysis.) The Babylonian Temple of Entemenanki was a favorite amongst some.¹⁵ Where historical questions have guided critical interpretation of the narrative, they will be of interest. Generally speaking, however, early Jewish exegetes were not historical-critical in their interests or approaches. I attempt, therefore, to remain resolutely literary in my analysis.

¹⁴ These remarks are from a pre-publication version presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. I wish to thank Dr. Baden for sharing a version of his conference paper prior to its publication. Joel Baden, “The Tower of Babel: A Critique of the Methodology of Literary Analysis,” (paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., 20 November, 2006).

¹⁵ E. Speiser argued against viewing the Tower of Babel as a biblical version of Entemenanki for chronological reasons. He held that “such an interpretation ... is ruled out by chronology. For the towering structure that the Greeks saw and described was the final achievement of Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar, in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.” (E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* [AB 1; Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1964], 75). On source-critical grounds Speiser dates the narrative to the Yahwist, which he saw as a 10th century BCE author. His own suggestion is that the ancient Israelite storyteller had a literary, rather than an actual, model for the Tower of Babel. The *Enumah Elish* is the literary model in question. The Babylonian text references a ziggurat names Esagil. Speiser explains that “it so happens that the Sumerian name Esagil means literally ‘the structure with up-raised head’. ... It is to this phrase, in a well-known canonical composition, transmitted directly or indirectly, that the biblical phrase ‘with its top (literally head) in the sky’ obviously harkens back” (Speiser, *Genesis*, 75–76).

CHAPTER ONE

RETURN TO BABEL: READING WITHOUT THE CANON

It is the unwritten part of books that would be the most interesting.¹

1. *Introduction*

Imagine that an archaeological expedition uncovers a short, broken text which contains only the one hundred and twenty-one Hebrew words present in the Tower of Babel narrative. What would (what could) we make of this story? How would scholars go about deciphering the meaning of this text? We must imagine a world, of course, in which the remainder of the Hebrew Bible is either unknown or else known also only in fragmentary form. We would realize quickly that context or canon is essential in making meaning from this narrative.

The following is an exercise in reading without the canon. Our first context is confined to the story itself. It is useful at the outset of this study to examine the biblical narrative in minute detail, to gain an appreciation for the construction of the actual biblical text. Here it is helpful (even if clichéd) to think of the words as the building bricks of the narrative. The central question posed is: How does one interpret the narrative in literary isolation? It should be clear that no exegete—ancient or modern—has ever actually interpreted the narrative in such fashion.² Such an exercise, however, attempts to provide a control against which other readings can be compared. The *hermeneutical re-construction* of this short narrative by later

¹ William M. Thackery, "To Paul Emile Daurand Forgues, 16 September 1864," in *Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackery* (ed. Gordon N. Ray; 4 vols. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1946), 3:389–391.

² In actual fact, *reading-without-the-canon* is simply a heuristic device which attempts to place some distance between the biblical text and its interpretations. It is absolutely impossible to read this text—or any text!—apart from some context. Even the ability to decipher the Hebrew terms relies upon a prior knowledge of classical Hebrew.

interpretive traditions will be more understandable following a thorough analysis of the language of the text, with special attention to *ambiguities and gaps* present in the biblical narrative.

2. *Between the Bricks of Babel:*
Wolfgang Iser and Reception Aesthetics

A focus on *ambiguity* and the language of *gaps* is not uncommon in contemporary reader-response approaches to biblical literature.³ Modern exploration of the gapped nature of *all narrative* goes back to the work of Wolfgang Iser and the school of ‘reception aesthetics.’⁴ Iser was most concerned with the role of the reader in the production of literary meaning. Literary critic Terry Eagleton marks the birth of reception aesthetics with the following typology of the history of the study of literature.

One might very roughly periodize the history of modern literary theory in three stages: a preoccupation with the author (Romanticism and 19th century); an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and a marked shift of attention to the reader over recent years. The reader has always been the most underprivileged of this trio—strangely, since without him or her there would be no literary work.⁵

Iser realized the essential role played by the reader in the act of interpretation, but did not wish to allow that interpretation was a purely subjective

³ Most famously, see Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Narrative and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). For a broad overview of the impact of reader-response criticism in the field of biblical studies, see Edgar V. McKnight, “Reader-Response Criticism,” in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application* (ed. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 230–252. A number of influential works of New Testament scholarship have drawn from the font of reader-response: Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); James L. Resseguie, “Reader-Response Criticism and the Synoptic Gospels,” *JAAR* 52 (1984): 307–324; W. Randolph Tate, *Reading Mark from the Outside: Eco and Iser Leave their Marks* (Bethesda, Md.: Christian Universities Press, 1995). Pride of place for introducing reader-response criticism in biblical studies goes to Robert C. Tannehill, “The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role,” *JR* 57 (1977): 386–405.

⁴ The key works in this regard are Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) and *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (2d. ed.; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 64.

act with no relation to the actual structure of the literary work being interpreted (what he named the text's *repertoire*). He held, rather, that "central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient."⁶ The reader certainly is responsible for the construction—or "concretization"—of meaning with regard to a literary text. But the reader is not free to impose meaning on a text with no regard for the actual language and structure of that text. The text does place some restraints on what meanings can be constructed. Iser can be viewed, in this regard, as more conservative than Stanley Fish and his notion that any text can be interpreted in seemingly any fashion—provided such interpretation is sanctioned by an "interpretive community."⁷ Iser claims that:

the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader.⁸

Interpretation takes place *in-between* these two poles as various readers produce meaning in response to the structure/repertoire of the text.

Zoltán Schwáb has recently argued that Iser's theory is often presented as more conservative than a straightforward reading of his works should allow. What are the potential causes of such a discrepancy? He claims:

One of the reasons ... is obvious. One of Iser's most important and vehement debating partners is Fish who argues for a more radical reader-response theory—at least in his later writings. As a result, almost every assessment of Iser's work compares his theory with that of Fish and from this comparison it naturally flows that these assessments stress the reality and active/initiative role of the text in Iser's theory compared with the theory of Fish. The other reason why we get a different impression from the summaries of Iser's works than from the actual works themselves is that these summaries stress that the text restricts the possibilities of the reader. However, if somebody, having read a summary, curiously turns to one of Iser's early works to find out how exactly the text plays its restricting role he/she will not find the answer there.⁹

The restrictions posed by a text, according to Schwáb's reading, are actually quite minimal; but they do exist. Claiming that a reader cannot construct *any* interpretation she likes is not the same thing as claiming that the

⁶ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 20.

⁷ Stanley E. Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

⁸ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 21.

⁹ Zoltán Schwáb, "Mind the Gap: The Impact of Wolfgang Iser's Reader-Response Criticism on Biblical Studies—A Critical Assessment," *Literature & Theology* 17 (2003): 171–172.

subjective element of interpretation is minimal, which is exactly how many of Iser's devotees in the guild of biblical studies read him. It is at this point that a closer look at Iser's notion of the gapped nature of all narrative is essential.

"Iser's notion of the 'gap' is one of his most widely used and most often misunderstood notions in biblical studies," claims Schwáb.¹⁰ The gaps present in all literature should not be thought of as a deficiency of some sort. They are, rather, places of indeterminacy (what I have referred to above as sites of exegetical activity) where the reader is forced to make interpretive decisions. Every text not only invites, but also demands this sort of concretization. "A 'gap' conceals something," so says Schwáb, "that is of *vital importance*. Secondly, a 'gap' is not necessarily a lack of detail. In modern novels we have too many details and that is why we have more gaps."¹¹ These additional gaps actually allow for a multiplication of options for closing such gaps thereby fueling interpretive possibilities. Eagelton claims:

However solid it may seem, any work for reception theory is actually made up of 'gaps' ... the work is full of 'indeterminacies', elements which depend for their effect upon the reader's interpretation, and which can be interpreted in a number of different, perhaps mutually conflicting ways.¹²

The gaps, furthermore, require readers to come along and fill them in to create a coherent narrative. Iser is very clear that *consistency* is the fundamental good which drives every reading of a text. Readers attempt to close gaps because they wish to create a coherent and consistent whole out of the individual pieces of an artistic work. The literary work, in other words, is greater than the sum of its linguistic parts. "A literary text is not complete in itself. 'Gaps' exist—a lack of complete continuity and/or a lack of specification between the different literary and linguistic units."¹³

Schwáb is particularly concerned with the reception of Iser in the work of Meir Sternberg.¹⁴ In a widely known work, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, Sternberg uses the language of gaps to describe the style of certain biblical narratives and narrators. Biblical narrators are often quite adroit at the artful

¹⁰ Schwáb, "Mind the Gap," 174.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Eagelton, *Literary Theory*, 66.

¹³ Edgar V. McKnight, "Reader-Response Criticism," 232.

¹⁴ It is odd to speak of the reception of Iser in Sternberg's work. Sternberg only mentions Iser once—in a footnote (Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 556).

deployment of such gaps as a device to engage the reader. On Sternberg's reading, 'good' readers allow themselves to be guided to a proper closure of such gaps and 'good' narrators construct narratives which will bring about such resolution of meaning. While it is true that there are occasions where a gap can be filled in multiple and contradictory fashions, this does not lead to subjectivism in Sternberg's view. There is good gap-filling and there is bad gap-filling. "Illegitimate gap-filling," says Sternberg, "is one launched and sustained by the readers' subjective concerns (or dictated by more general preconceptions) rather than by the text's own norms and directives."¹⁵ For Sternberg (according to Schwáb),

the text always signals what is a 'gap' and sooner or later either the narrator himself will close the 'gap', or the text, negotiating all possible misunderstanding, leads the competent reader towards the right closure ... the reader is totally under control of the text.¹⁶

Nothing could be further from the perspective of Iser where true meaning only and always occurs in the interaction of text and reader, not in the domination of one over the other.

The nature of the Babel narrative is particularly suited to an Iser-informed approach. Schwáb even deploys metaphorically useful language to demonstrate how Iser's notion of gap and ambiguity might apply to Gen 11. Speaking of the unlimited number of legitimate—yet restricted—readings possible for any one text along an Iserian model, he claims:

According to Iser we have the repertoire, the plot, etc. in the text but these are full of 'gaps' and very often we have to establish the relationship between them—as if we are given the building materials and are required to build the building. *Now it seems obvious that if we are given bricks we can not build from them everything which, for example, we could build with ... concrete.* But if we press Iser asking precisely what kind of buildings are excluded in the case of different building materials? And broadly what kind of building materials exist? We do not find the answer.¹⁷

¹⁵ It is interesting that Sternberg seems to have in mind here the type of gap-filling that is characteristic of midrashic literature. He states that "to emphasize the active role played by the reader in constructing the literary work is by no means to imply that gap-filling is an arbitrary process ... Where there's a will, the Midrash will find a way" (Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 188). The implication appears to be that midrashic activity is an example of gap-filling driven by readers' subjective concerns and fails to deal with the text's norms and directives.

¹⁶ Schwáb, "Mind the Gap," 174–175.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 172. Italics added.

The narrative of Babel—like every narrative—is riddled with gaps and indeterminacies. There are spaces in between the bricks of the narrative. There are, therefore, multiple correct ways in which to connect or close these gaps. If Schwáb is correct (and I believe he is), some biblical scholars have been particularly uncomfortable with the level of ambiguity and subjectivity permitted by Iser's notion of gap-filling. For the purposes of this study, it is exactly the multiplicity of ways in which gaps in the biblical narrative can and have been filled that is of signal importance. Later chapters will explore in detail the exact nature of gap-filling undertaken by early Jewish readers of Babel. A central goal of the remainder of the present chapter, therefore, is to *identify gaps and indeterminacies* in the Babel narrative—to examine the spaces between the linguistic bricks of the narrative. Where, and in what ways, does the biblical narrative invite later readers to insert themselves? What questions are posed or raised but not answered by the tower account? In addition, I will also explore how various interpreters have attempted to close the gaps present in the narrative of Babel. This is an exploration of what Sternberg might call 'subjective' elements. What assumptions about the text are operative on the part of commentators? All of this points to one larger question: What are the *textual foundations* for the later interpretive edifices constructed by early Jewish exegetes? My own reading of contemporary expositors is meant to highlight both the tendency to impose certainty on the Babel narrative and the manner in which modern interpreters attempt to close the gaps in the narrative of Babel. Let us turn to the narrative itself.

3. *Before Babel: Background to Building*

וַיְהִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ שָׁפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים

And it was that the entire world had the same language and few words¹⁸

The account of the Tower of Babel begins with the assertion that “the entire world had the same language and few words.” A modern reader of the biblical text might glide easily over such a phrase. What is being communicated here other than the background against which the following story is

¹⁸ I have been hesitant to provide a single translation of the narrative in English. As this chapter explores the multiple and conflicting ways in which the tower narrative can be read, a single translation might imply that I favor the interpretation presented in such a translation. My own translation, therefore, should be seen as provisional and partial—as should all translations.

to be narrated? At some point in the history of humanity, all peoples spoke one and the same language. The linguistic diversity that is the hallmark of human experience was once non-existent. The first verse of the tower narrative, however, is not quite so clear. If the biblical narrator had simply stopped with the assertion that all the earth possessed one language (literally 'one lip'), there might have been less room for later interpretive expansion. The biblical narrator, however, (perhaps influenced by biblical poetic parallelism)¹⁹ added a phrase: וְכָכָרִים אֶחָדִים. It is somewhat ironic that this short verse, which expresses primeval linguistic unity, presents (what in many accounts is) a grammatical problem.²⁰ What is meant by this phrase? How are we to render it? A central interpretive issue centers on how to deal with the repetition present. Is it a re-presentation of the notion of 'one language' or is some additional piece of information about the linguistic situation of primeval humanity being communicated by the narrator? In his commentary, Hamilton argues for a distinction between the two halves of the first verse. He states:

Students of ancient and modern languages are well acquainted with the phenomena of *lingua franca*, a medium of communication among representatives of different speech groups. At various times in antiquity, Sumerian, Babylonian, Aramaic and Greek each served in this capacity ... The phrase one speech is not just a repetition of one language. The two phrases are related but not interchangeable. This age possessed a common language ('one language') with a conventional vocabulary ('one speech').²¹

LaCocque points ominously to the phrase as signifying "a severe limitation of interests on the part of the crowd."²² He claims that the people spoke the same language and had only one topic of conversation—construction. Westermann, however, states that:

¹⁹ Ronald S. Hendel makes this suggestion in his review of C. Uehlinger's work: "... sapa ehat (one language) in v 1 may well be an example of semiparallelistic prose (a seconded by b), in which the second phrase is more obscure or 'literary' than the first phrase" (Ronald S. Hendel, Review of *Weltreich und eine Rede: Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbau-erzählung* [Gen 11:1–9] CBQ 55 [1993], 786).

²⁰ How can one make sense of a plural form of the word for one? From a strictly grammatical perspective, Waltke and O'Connor offer the following: "The adjective אחד forms a plural. Near a use of the singular form in a specific indefinite construction, the plural has a similar sense. Elsewhere the plural is used in an expression of time, יָמִים אֶחָדִים; the sense, here, too, is specific indefinite, 'a few days, some little while'" (Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1989], 274–275). The biblical reference is to Gen 29:20.

²¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 351.

²² LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence*, 26.

the expression ‘one language (lip) and one vocabulary’ describes poetically the unity of language by means of the organ of speech, שִׁפָּה, and the words that proceed from it, דְּבָרִים.²³

These various approaches to the first verse of Gen 11 are instructive. Notice that the indeterminacy here is not the result of a *lack of information*, but is brought about by *too much information*. Repetition and an attempt to explain it sufficiently are at issue. (We shall see below that there are theological reasons why repetition in a canonized text which is considered to be divine speech is particularly problematic for early Jewish interpreters.) Hamilton answers such indeterminacy by arguing that the biblical text is actually describing the presence of a *lingua franca*. He arrives at such an interpretation on the basis of his larger knowledge of ancient and contemporary societies (i.e., “students of ancient and modern languages ...”). LaCocque deploys the repetition to highlight the people’s intense focus and single-mindedness. Westermann explains the same textual data, not with reference to larger cultural and linguistic practice, but by reference to literary assumptions about the nature of Hebrew poetry. All three, however, close the gap brought about by repetition.

וַיְהִי בְּנִסְעָם מִקֵּדֶם וַיִּמָּצְאוּ בְּקֶעֱהָ בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם

And it was while they were migrating from the East, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled down there.

The next portion of the narrative continues to provide background information. There are two issues which require clarification. First, the narrator states that “*they* found a plain in the land of Shinar and *they* settled down there.” We are without a firm antecedent. Who are *they*? The most straightforward assumption would be that the entire population of human beings is included in this collective. We must assume that the group constitutes “the entire earth.” This assumption will prove to be problematic to later interpreters. Subsequent readers, therefore, will strive to break up this unmarked collective into various factions and to assign particular roles to the different groupings. The “entire earth” will include only certain members of the descendants of Noah.

A second question involves an interesting aside which opens the narrative action. This undefined group is in the process of migration. They are moving from one place to another. More specifically, the people are “migrating from the East” (בְּנִסְעָם מִקֵּדֶם). Modern exegetes are somewhat baffled by

²³ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; CC; Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 543.

this particular phrase and seek grammatical clarification. The term **קִדְמָה** possesses both potential *geographical and temporal* meaning: it can point to either East or beginning. Most modern commentators focus on the former meaning of the term.²⁴ Wenham offers three explanations: from the East, eastward or in the East. He claims that “the former translation is more natural, but clearly the issue depends on where the people are supposed to have come from before arriving in Babylon.”²⁵ Moving outside the boundary of the story, he also detects a foreshadowing of the Babelites’ errant nature:

Here (11:2) and in (Gen) 2:8 the people are ‘east of Canaan.’ Traveling east of Eden was the judgment on Adam, Eve, and Cain (3:24; 4:16), and the mention of similar journeying here may be intended as a reminder of mankind’s earlier sentence.²⁶

Wenham makes an interesting case. For the present, it is important to note that Wenham is able to produce theological meaning from a grammatically vague phrase by exploiting its potential meaning within a larger context. The indeterminacy of the phrase **מִקִּדְמָה מִבְּנִינֵם** is lessened (although not removed) by exploring the narrative company the phrase keeps. It is curious, however, that on the very same page Wenham comments that “**נִסְעַ** is often used of the patriarchal and Exodus wanderings (cf. 12:9; 33:17; Exod 12:37; 14:19).” Wenham does not choose, for whatever reason, to make any exegetical assumptions about the Babelites based on the more common and presumably more *positive use* of this term.²⁷ It is interesting to contrast Wenham’s interpretation with a much older critical approach. S.R. Driver presents a rather different view of the matter. He allows the uncertainty to stand and claims:

²⁴ Christian Rose, however, has recently argued for reading the phrase both geographically and temporally. He compares the mention of **קִדְמָה** in Gen 11:2 to its similar appearance in Gen 2:8 with regard to the Garden of Eden. He claims that the biblical narrator is punning in both passages on the double meaning of the word to designate both geographical and temporal information. See Christian Rose, “Nochmals: Der Turmbau zu Babel,” *VT* 54 (2004): 225. One might translate Gen 11:2 according to this logic—“it was when they were wandering around in the ancient period/primeval era.”

²⁵ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), 233.

²⁶ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 238–239.

²⁷ LaCocque goes even further in his negative evaluation of the Babelites on the basis of this phrase. “Their settlement in the East is already in and of itself a token of their rebellion against God. They do so in a mood of defiance. Something like, ‘If we are not welcome any longer in Eden, we’ll build a place of our own in Shinar. And if God shuts the gate of the Garden with Seraphim, we’ll bypass this hurdle and construct for ourselves a vertical channel of communication with the divine ... of which we’ll have control and disposition.’” (LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence*, 44).

the expression is a vague one; and it is idle to speculate, especially in view of the uncertainty ... as to the original context of the narrative, whence the writer may have supposed mankind to have started.²⁸

Driver appears comfortable with the ambiguous phraseology related to the Babelites. Driver's comments are telling because they demonstrate the enormous role methodology itself can play in the production of meaning. Dominated by then-emerging source-critical concerns, it never occurs to Driver to explore options outside the narrative of Gen 11 itself. He attempts to confine himself to a reading without the canon. The hermeneutical return, however, is (admittedly) considerably less than that achieved by Wenham.

Regardless of how one chooses to read the phrase **בְּנוֹסְעִים מִקֵּדִים**, it is important to notice that there is a gap present in the narration. Wenham is correct to note that no indication is given of the whereabouts of this group before they strike out and discover the plain in the land of Shinar. He fails to see the exegetical importance of this lacuna, however. The previous location of the people or the cause of their migration might go a long way towards explaining why they felt the need to gather together on the plain of Shinar and construct a city and a tower. A central element of the plot—motivation—is obscured. Westermann—demonstrating another methodological approach—underscores the gap by commenting that, while the short phrase points historically to “a transition from nomadic to sedentary life ... (the narrative) certainly leaves much in the air.”²⁹ Indeed. Later interpreters will attempt to pull the narrative down to earth. At present, we must leave the question to one side. The larger context of the Primeval History, moreover, will offer only limited help in resolving the question of the people's whereabouts before they find the plain of Shinar and chose to settle down there. Such questions may seem minimal at present, but the motivation of the coming action will rely on answering some of these uncertainties.

4. *The Plan of the Babelites*

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ הָבָה נִלְבְּנָה לִבְנִים
וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשִׂרְפָּה וְתָהִי לָהֶם הַלְבָּנָה לְאַבֵּן וְהַחֹמֶר הִזֶּה לָהֶם לְחֹמֶר

And a man said to his neighbor, “Come, let’s make some bricks and burn them in the fire.” And bricks served them as stone and they used bitumen for mortar.

²⁸ S.R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis: With Introduction and Notes* (Westminster Commentaries; London: Methuen & Co., 1904), 135.

²⁹ Westermann, *Genesis*, 544.

The people immediately set to work. A number of issues are present here, including: narrative form, social reality, and historical context. It is, first, somewhat curious that the people propose and set about making and firing bricks before there is any indication of what exactly the building process will entail. Westermann notes the narrative anomaly without offering any explanation for it.

The normal narrative method would be to put the decision to build a city and a tower at the beginning; the execution, and this is what v. 3 is talking about, would then follow.³⁰

The placement of construction material before discussion of building projects is not entirely out of keeping with what is known of literary reportage of building practices in the ancient Near East. A literary parallel often cited to explain the reference to the priority of building material is from the Babylonian creation epic, the *Enumah Elish*. The relevant passage reads:

The Annunaki wielded the hoe/For one whole year they molded its bricks.
When the second year arrived/they raised the head of Esagil, a replica of the
Apsu
They built the lofty ziggurat of the Apsu/and established its ... as a dwelling
for Anu, Enlil and Ea.³¹

Secondly, it has also been striking to a number of ancient and modern readers that the biblical narrative presents a highly democratic presentation of the building process. Dana Nolan Fewell is somewhat suspicious of the irenic reading of the text. She claims (against the plain meaning of the text) that “as we all know, kings don’t build their capital cities or their royal residents by themselves ... empires are seldom built by communities of consensual goodwill.”³² One searches in vain, however, for a king in Gen 11. The biblical narrator presents no ruler or ring-leader inciting the people. The biblical phrase *וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ* points to a generally agreed upon plan of action.³³ The people at large seem to agree almost instinctively to begin the building process: “and they said to each other.” Does this presentation constitute a gap in the narrative? A gap is present, perhaps, only from certain perspectives. This unanimity of action will appear remarkable to many early Jewish exegetes for whom there must surely have been someone

³⁰ Westermann, *Genesis*, 545.

³¹ An unpublished translation by W.G. Lambert quoted in Wenhan, *Genesis*, 237.

³² Dana Nolan Fewell, “Building Babel,” in *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader* (ed. A.K.M. Adam; St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 10.

³³ See Jud 6:29, 10:18; Ps 12:3; Mal 3:16; 1 Kgs 8:31 for additional examples of this phrase.

or some group of people who suggested the idea of beginning a building program. The building of a city and an enormous tower takes planning. The people must have had their reasons and motivations. The text, however, is deafeningly silent concerning this.

An additional puzzling aspect of the text follows the call to produce bricks. There is marked interest in the building materials themselves. "Brick served them as stone, and they used bitumen for mortar." Critical scholarship has long used this (seemingly innocuous) reference to argue for the historical verisimilitude of the text.³⁴ Anderson summarizes this view:

The Babel story reflects the concrete realities of ancient Mesopotamia ... it includes true-to-life details that accord with archaeological knowledge, such as the use of kiln-fired bricks to compensate for the lack of natural stone in the Mesopotamian plain.³⁵

The original author(s) of the narrative is betraying here a sign of the foreignness of Babylonian building processes. And yet, from a literary perspective, the reference can not be eliminated as gratuitous, utilized simply for historical reconstruction. Given the paucity of detail provided in the short account, there must be some meaning which is communicated by the reference to bricks and mortar, stone and bitumen. One encounters here the problem of determining what is and is not superfluous information. True, the reference to bricks and mortar certainly adds nothing significant to the plot of the narrative, and yet the narrator spends a good deal of time discussing the building materials. To what end? Wenham sees cultural polemic at play:

³⁴ I should note, in passing, that the JPS translation of the above text casts the reference to brick and mortar in dashes. The visual effect of the punctuation implies that the information is not really central to the plot of the narrative. The JPS presents the material in the following manner: 'Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard.'—Bricks served them as stone and bitumen served them as mortar—and they said The importance of the phrase is dismissed through artful punctuation.

³⁵ Bernhard Anderson, "The Tower of Babel: Unity and Diversity in God's Creation," in *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 166. A recent interpretation along these lines is provided by John H. Walton, who goes further than many commentators in the importance he attaches to this material. He states that "not only is the description of the building materials an accurate reflection of a true distinction between Israelite and Mesopotamian building methods, but it also gives us some important information. Whole cities were not generally built of these materials. Even ziggurats themselves only used burnt brick and bitumen for the outer layers while using regular sun-dried mud brick for the inner layers ... The mention of the expensive building materials would thus suggest that the discussion is focusing on public buildings" (John H. Walton, "The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Account and Its Implications," *BBR* 5 [1995]: 163–164). The actual biblical narrative, however, is not so specific.

This is more than a technical note on differences in ancient building methods; there is also an implied disparagement of Babylonian materials (we use stone, they have only brick).³⁶

Von Rad concurs:

Our narrator, for whom the use of stone for large buildings was a matter of course, has a special purpose in mentioning it: the material that the men used for their gigantic undertaking was perishable and unsatisfactory!³⁷

Because the reference to bricks and mortar appear gratuitous to modern interpreters *and* because modern readers seek some reason for how ancient narratives were constructed, Wenham and von Rad detect cultural polemic transmitted through a curious notice concerning building materials. They may well be correct. For our purposes, I would simply highlight that the biblical narrative itself makes no such explicit claims about the superiority of Israelite building practices or the corresponding inferiority of the Babylonians's.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִבֵּה נִבְנֶה-לָּנוּ
עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה-לָּנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן-נִפְּוֶז עַל-פְּנֵי כָּל-הָאָרֶץ

And they said, "Come, let's build ourselves a city and a tower. Its summit will be in the heavens. And let's make for ourselves a name, lest we are scattered across the entire world."

The description of the tower itself and its relationship to the city are also open for debate. The biblical text claims that the tower is to have its "head in the heavens": רֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם. What is meant by such a turn of speech? Many readers interpret this phrase in a highly negative sense. The approach is almost hyper-literal. According to such a reading, the builders are actually attempting to construct an edifice which will stretch from earth to heaven. Wenham, characteristic of this line of interpretation, reads the phrase against the background of Babylonian theology and the towering ziggurats at its liturgical center.³⁸

From a purely human viewpoint, building a tower as high as the sky is an audacious undertaking, but it seems likely that Genesis sees it as sacrilege ... for the sky is also heaven, the home of God, and this ancient skyscraper may be another human effort to become like God.³⁹

³⁶ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 239.

³⁷ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (trans. John H. Marks; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 144.

³⁸ For a good discussion of the function and role of the ziggurat in ancient Near Eastern religion, see Walton, "Background of the Tower of Babel," 156–162.

³⁹ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 239.

Von Rad, however, cautions that:

... the statement that the tower should reach to heaven must not be pressed; it is only an expression for the special height of the building. That men wanted to storm heaven, God's dwelling place, is not said.⁴⁰

I would second von Rad. It is not clear that the phrase should be taken in such a literal fashion. It is equally plausible to read the reference to the tower's "summit in the heavens" as a stock phrase meaning *very tall*. We will return to this topic in the following chapter.

Regardless of how the idiom is taken, there is a sense in much of the modern commentary literature that such a goal is risible because it is ludicrous to suppose such a thing is possible. It is impossible, if we are to believe modern exegetes, for a humanly-created tower to actually stretch all the way from earth to heaven. These same commentators do not seem bothered by the equally problematic image of a 'ladder' stretching from heaven to earth in Gen 28. The descent of Yahweh, discussed below, is adduced as further proof of the peoples' quixotic attempt to reach beyond their grasp. This evaluation does not arise from the native cosmology of the biblical text, but, rather, from modern notions of the actual impossibility (at least at present) of constructing an edifice which would be able to reach the heavens—however one might define the location according to modern scientific thought.⁴¹ Driver takes the original historical context seriously when he asserts that:

the expression is probably meant here, not hyperbolically, but literally, 'heaven' being regarded as an actual vault, which might be reached, at least by a bold effort. The coincidence may be accidental; but it may be worth mentioning that the Bab[ylonian] and Ass[yrian] kings prided themselves upon the height of their temples.⁴²

If the native cosmology of the biblical narrator views reaching the heavens as a *real possibility* other interpretive options are available. Certainly, the Babylonian ziggurat upon which the Tower of Babel is supposed to be modeled was an instrument of transference between the realm of the gods and humanity. The Babelites' efforts might still be blasphemous, but they are not necessarily quixotic. In addition, their desire to construct a link between heaven and earth might serve other functions besides blasphemy.

⁴⁰ Von Rad, *Genesis*, 145.

⁴¹ In the ancient world, Philo of Alexandria will also ridicule the builders for their attempt to construct a tower that could reach to the heavens. See Chapter Seven below.

⁴² S.R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 135.

Early Jewish exegetes, it goes without saying, were interpreting without the benefit of modern notions of the vast space separating the 'heavens' and the earth. The heavens were a lot closer for ancient Jews. Further discussion of the possible meaning of the phrase will have to await our discussion of the narrative in the canonical context. At present, however, it is important to highlight the ambiguity surrounding the description of the tower and what the builders are attempting to achieve through its construction. It is also important to notice that basic assumptions about the very nature of reality also can determine (prejudge?) the exegetical options available to an interpreter.

The relationship between the city and the tower is also a vexing question. The fact that the narrative is often known by the tower portion of the pair demonstrates that the building of the tower is seen to be the problematic segment for many modern interpreters—the city is allowed to go without extensive comment. In contrast, Cassuto claims that “the expression customarily employed in Jewish literature, ‘The Story of the Generation of the Division’ (דור הפלגה) ... best fits the intention and content of the text.”⁴³ The city and the tower, however, should not be separated quite so easily. There are a number of options available for reading the ‘city and tower’ phrase. It may be hendiadys. It is also possible that the reference to the tower is a means of characterizing exactly what type of city is being described—namely, one of sufficient size or importance to require a tower. Such a tower may serve either a defensive or liturgical function. Those scholars who tend to focus on reconstructing the historical background of the text (i.e., identifying the tower with a particular ziggurat or other structure known from the archaeological record) tend to associate the tower with a religious structure.⁴⁴ In the present narrative, as we will see below, the possibility that the tower could be considered as a defensive structure (perhaps, a fortress) has some support from comparison with other biblical texts. The choice between these two options—defensive and liturgical—has a strong influence on the way that commentators deal with the motivation of the builders.⁴⁵ If, on one hand, the tower is treated as a defensive structure of some sort then we are left to ask who or what the people are seeking to

⁴³ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part II From Noah to Abraham Genesis V 19–XI 32* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1961; repr., Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1972), 226.

⁴⁴ Walton, “Background of the Tower of Babel,” 164–171.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the city element as hermeneutically important in Gen 11, see Frank S. Frick, *The City in Ancient Israel* (SBLDS 36; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), 207–208.

defend themselves from. If, on the other hand, the tower is treated as a liturgical structure, multiple questions concerning the religious background of the Babelites come into play. We will see below that many of the interpretive expansions of the biblical narrative have their foundation in an initial decision concerning the nature and purpose of the tower. In any event, we will need to pay special attention to the interplay between the city and the tower portion of this particular word-pair.

Motivation is the largest area of ambiguity in the Babel narrative. There are two motivations offered for the building program: one positive and one negative. The two motivations, furthermore, should be read as mutually illuminating. The positive motivation is the desire “to make a name.”⁴⁶ This phrase has been the source of some of the most damning interpretations by exegetes of the builders’ motivations. “Again the people’s ambition suggests impiety ... mankind is again attempting to usurp divine prerogatives.” Wenham goes on to state that:

God promised to make Abraham’s name great and also David’s. But elsewhere in Scripture it is God alone who makes a name for himself (e.g., Isa 63:12, 13; Jer 32:20; Neh. 9:10). Mankind is again attempting to usurp divine prerogatives.⁴⁷

Within a larger canonical context, much of the vitriol aimed at the Babelites might indeed be justified. In isolation, however, the desire to make a name—even for themselves—is not necessarily so damning. Compare the reading of Cassuto:

Most modern expositors consider that the Bible implies that the ambition to win fame in the world is one of the things that God dislikes. But this is not true.⁴⁸

Most interesting is the data posited by Cassuto to buttress this point. *He cites the example of God’s promise to Abraham!* He claims that “for among the blessings bestowed upon Abraham is included also that of renown.”⁴⁹ Wenham and Cassuto examine the exact same textual evidence and reach opposite conclusions. Returning to the confines of the story itself (without reference to Abraham or name-making elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible) the desire to “make a name” is at best a neutral objective. The narrator

⁴⁶ I do not mean to prejudice the discussion by asserting that the desire to make a name is a positive motivation for the builders. I only mean to point to the fact that the builders are trying to acquire something with this motivation, not avoid something. In this regard, the desire to make a name should be seen as a positive motivation.

⁴⁷ Wenham, *Genesis*, 239–240.

⁴⁸ Cassuto, *Genesis*, 243.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, One could rebut that *it is the divine* that grants renown!

certainly does not choose to comment on this goal of the builders. It is, rather, the larger theological convictions of interpreters (in concert with the whole of the biblical text) which determine whether name-making is viewed in a laudatory or condemnatory light. For Wenham, name-making is emblematic of ambition verging on impiety. Cassuto does not read impiety in the text and seems to possess an appreciation for the human drive towards success. Both commentators are reading the same text in light of the same canonical contexts. The source of their divergent analysis must lie somewhere beyond the bounds of the canon. The peoples' concern with name-making, furthermore, is connected inextricably to another motive. The people are afraid of being dispersed over the face of the earth. Cassuto, in fact, views name-making as no real motive at all. "It is ... incorrect to suppose that 'name-making' is mentioned here as the reason for the building of the city and the tower," he claims. "The enunciation of the objective begins only with the word *lest*, and the sentence, *let us make a name for ourselves*, comes, as it were, only in brackets."⁵⁰ The theologically weighted desire of the Babelites for a name according to Wenham, is only a parenthetical statement in the view of Cassuto.

There is, further, no indication why such a scattering would be a fearful prospect to the people or why or *even if* these particular people anticipate such an event. The reader is left to wonder as to the foundation of their fears. Are the people attempting to band together for some nefarious reason? There is no indication of this given in the text. Are the people expressing some normal human desire to remain together for safety or for the growth of community? The lack of firm comment on the part of the narrator allows for multiple and contradictory readings. For some readers, it is even possible to *identify with the builders*. Fewell has argued that the story is about "common human emotion: fear of the unknown ... this universal dimension of the story encourages our identification and elicits our sympathies."⁵¹ If this is the case, the narrative gives us no hint as to what dangers the people are banding together to fight or what sort of human community will be formed in this new collective dwelling in the shadow of the tower. All of these questions and possibilities are passed over with the phrase "let's make for ourselves a name, lest we are scattered across the entire world."

Furthermore, it is important to reiterate that the two motivations (name-making and scattering) are connected explicitly through the use of the

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Fewell, "Building Babel," 7.

Hebrew article פֶּן. Drawing on the larger corpus of biblical Hebrew literature, Carol Kaminski claims that:

the conjunction usually signifies a negative purpose or result clause. Sometimes this clause describes a situation that *will* result if the action of the main verb is not carried out. In other cases, the situation described in the subordinate clause is a *potential* situation that may arise. What is common in these negative purpose of result clauses is that the situation described in the subordinate clause is something *undesirable*.⁵²

Many modern interpreters tacitly ignore the conjunction and treat the notion of “making a name” in isolation from the desire not to be scattered. The narrative links the two issues closely. The people believe that the only way to avoid being scattered is to create a name for themselves. In what way does building a city and a tower create a name? How would the creation of this name allow the people to remain together? These are the sorts of questions which can certainly not be resolved through a simple reading of the text. These are precisely the types of questions, however, which later exegetes will attempt to answer.

5. Divine Response to Babelian Ambition

וַיֵּרֶד יְיָ לִרְאוֹת אֶת-הָעִיר וְאֶת-הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְנֵי הָאָדָם

And Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower which the human beings had built.

The story shifts from the terrestrial realm to the heavenly one and from human characters to a divine one with the notice that “Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower which human beings had built.” There is some uncertainty here concerning how far advanced the building program was. The form of the verb בָּנָה would suggest that the project was complete; the conclusion of the narrative, however, will complicate such a reading. The fact that Yahweh *descends* is treated as coldly sarcastic on the part of Hamilton. “It is difficult to miss the irony in this verse” he states, “even though they build the tower, it is so far from the heavens that God must come down to see it.”⁵³ The descent of Yahweh is read as a veiled mockery of the builders’ overweening ambition. Wenham claims that:

⁵² Carol Kaminski, *From Noah to Israel: Realization of the Primaevial Blessing After the Flood* (JSOTSup 413; London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 24.

⁵³ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 354.

we now see the tower through God's eyes. This tower which man thought reached heaven, God can hardly see! From the height of heaven it seems insignificant, so the Lord must come down to look at it! 'He sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers' (Isa 40:22).⁵⁴

For historical-critically minded readers, the notion of the descent of Yahweh is often used to argue for the alleged 'primitive' origin of the narrative. There remains here, as elsewhere in the Primeval History, quite an anthropomorphic understanding of the divine. Yahweh, not unlike many deities in the ancient Near East, appears as a curious god who must be on-scene if he wishes to be informed about human activities. A similar situation occurs in the narrative of the Garden of Eden when Yahweh seems unclear as to the whereabouts of Adam and Eve (Gen 3:9) or in the account of Cain and Able as Yahweh enquires of Cain as to his brother's location (Gen 4:9). It is possible to see here an image of a deity who is not in complete control of the human situation. Cassuto was unhappy with such implications. He states that:

this 'coming down' does not mean that God descended in order to find out what was happening ... on the contrary ... it follows that he was already aware of what had taken place. The expression *came down* is only one of the corporeal phrases of the Pentateuch, and it means that God, as a righteous Judge, wished to investigate the matter thoroughly.⁵⁵

And yet the text under question does not speak of Yahweh as Judge and makes no claims for divine omniscience. Other modern commentators are often quick to pass over this particular detail of the narrative. Wenham does not pass over the implication that Yahweh is limited in his knowledge. He flatly refutes it!

God's descent to earth to view the tower is no more proof of the author's primitive anthropomorphic view of God than is God's asking Adam and Eve where they were hiding in the Garden an indication of his ignorance. It is simply a brilliant and dramatic way of expressing the puniness of man's great achievements, when set alongside the creator's omnipotence.⁵⁶

Wenham's interpretation here, I would suggest, is strongly influenced by larger theological claims about the nature of deity in later Judaism and

⁵⁴ Wenham, *Genesis*, 240. Wenham even provides us with an *intertext* which makes his own interpretation of the passage under consideration explicable. He is drawing on the theological language of later Israelite tradition to provide substance and reality to a rather straightforward statement-of-fact in Genesis.

⁵⁵ Cassuto, *The Book of Genesis*, 244.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Christianity. It is unlikely that he would make the same sort of statement about Marduk, Ba'al or Osiris. My purpose is not to criticize Wenham or Casuto for holding theological convictions and interpreting Genesis in light of them. The purpose, rather, is to observe how easily and unconsciously theological conviction can be utilized to marginalize or deny certain exegetical options and privilege others.

For ancient Jewish exegetes, the notion of Yahweh actually descending to examine the work of the Babelites was also troubling. Yahweh's descent, however, is only part of the problem. The Babel narrative also contains an example of the infamous divine plural which was equally problematic to many ancient biblical interpreters who were committed to a notion of monotheism. To whom is Yahweh speaking? Is the divine accompanied in his descent to inspect the work of the builders?

וַיֹּאמֶר יי הִן עַם אֶחָד וּשְׂפָה אֶחָת לְכָלם זֶה
הַחֵלֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא־יִבְצֵר מֵהֶם כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת

And Yahweh said, "Look: One people with one language for all of them. This is only the beginning of their actions. Now none of the things which they plan to do will be beyond them."

Yahweh ascertains the situation rather quickly. What is less clear is the meaning of his description of the situation. Westermann claims that "God's first response after looking at the work of the people is not an action, but a reflection."⁵⁷ Yahweh moves beyond linguistic designation of the people. Prior to the Yahweh's speech, the people have been characterized as possessing "the same language and few words." They have been referred to as "the entire world." For Yahweh, however, this group represents a political collective. They are "one people, with one language for all of them." Something new has come into existence with this phrase.⁵⁸ There is a shift from linguistic unity to national unity; or, rather, the two are equated. Linguistic unity equals national unity. This absolute unity of the people is highlighted by the use of the word לְכָלם. As already noted, this new political

⁵⁷ Westermann, *Genesis*, 551.

⁵⁸ One possible approach is to read this narrative as the origin of political philosophy in the Hebrew Bible. "If the creation narrative introduces the Bible's metaphysics, the story of the Garden of Eden its theology, and the tales of Cain and Abel and the flood its ethics, then the story of the Tower of Babel serves to present the Bible's politics. It is here that the biblical text sets forth its ideas of nationhood, ethnicity, and heterogeneity, notions that were revolutionary for their time and went on to play a central role in the political thought of generations to come," (Daniel Gordis, "The Tower of Babel and the Birth of Nationhood," *Azure* (2010), 19–20).

designation is viewed as only the *beginning* of what humanity will be able to accomplish.

Is the tower itself perceived as a threat by Yahweh? Even more importantly, what is the nature of the threat posed by the building program? Driver notes, almost in passing, what he takes to be the clear implication of the text. The passage suggests that Yahweh is *threatened by the building of the tower*. Driver asserts that “the narrative, it must be remembered, embodies a rudimentary, child-like conception of the deity.”⁵⁹ Commentators such as Hamilton find such a view unacceptable and, drawing on the fact that the deity must descend even to see the edifice, argue against the possibility that Yahweh was threatened. Yahweh claims that the tower is only the very beginning of the work of the people. The key element in Yahweh’s assessment is the reference to the *beginning*. The focus here is not on the suggestion that Yahweh is directly threatened by the building of the city or the tower. What is threatening is the potential of humanity made apparent by the people’s unified efforts at construction. Other, un-named, acts of co-operation between humanity are the true source of Yahweh’s fear. Hamilton summarizes the situation ably:

God does not scoff at the building or consider it much ado about nothing. There is no suggestion that he views it as a joke If something is not done to abort the project, the consequences could be far-reaching. His concern is ... that such a hubris-motivated scheme will become a precedent and stimulation for other schemes.⁶⁰

On this reading, the ability of the people to carry out any plan or goal they might desire is a threat—not to Yahweh directly and literally—but to humanity’s relationship with the Creator and the Creator’s purposes. Once again, Westermann suggests a possible reading:

This rather complicated reflection of God betrays a relatively late stage in the narrative as we have it. It is not concerned with simply facts and conclusions drawn from them. It is colored rather by reflection, by consideration of the possibilities which would now be open to people if all restrictions on information and understanding were set aside and they could consequently act as a self-contained unity This must lead to the absolute autonomy of humankind. Hence the limitation which belongs to their created state would be called into question: their position vis-à-vis the creator. Humanity exists only in its state as creature: so its continuation is endangered by the threat of autonomy.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Driver, *Genesis*, 136.

⁶⁰ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 354.

⁶¹ Westermann, *Genesis*, 551.

This is beautiful theology, but it is simply not present in the biblical text. The narrative does not explain in any explicit manner Yahweh's motivations. They are 'indeterminate.' Why should the unified ambitions of this 'one people' provoke such divine consternation? This is the question that lies behind a great deal of the commentary literature. The threat—if such a term is appropriate—is what will occur if the people are not halted. If Yahweh does not intervene, nothing will be impossible for the people. After building a tower which stretches all the way to the heavens, what could the people possibly do for an encore?

Despite these questions, there is an almost universal assertion that the tower itself does not actually pose a threat to the deity; that, in point of fact, the tower is something of a rather puny structure from the divine viewpoint. Such a strong assertion, however, has an unintended exegetical consequence; it removes some of the justification for the action taken by the deity. If the tower and its construction is so much of a non-event, something that only provokes the deity to consider what other events a unified humanity might engage in, why does the divine take the drastic action of scattering the builders and bringing their aspirations to a halt? The key question which animates the entire discussion is the attitude of the divine: why is Yahweh so provoked? Precisely what is it that humanity will eventually attempt that is unacceptable to the divine? Is the divine action which follows a response to what Yahweh foresees as the limitless possibilities of unchecked humanity? Or, is the divine response which soon follows a response to some actual sinful behavior on the part of the people? Is it both? In all this discussion related to Yahweh's motivation lies a rather simple question: What is the rationale for the divine reaction? A different approach might be to ask: is the scattering and confusion about to take place *preventative* or *punitive*? Is it a simple response or a punishment? We will return to this question when we re-read the narrative in the context of the Primeval History.

הָבָה נֵרְדָּה וְנִבְלֶה שְׁמֵ שְׁפָתֵם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שִׁפְתֵי רֵעֵהוּ

Come, let's go down and let's confuse there their language so that human beings cannot understand each other.

The solution to the divine dilemma is clear. Mimicking the language of the builders, Yahweh summons an indeterminate group: "Let's go down and let's confuse there their language." This is the second time that Yahweh descends. While Gunkel used this double-descent in his division of the narrative of Babel, early Jewish commentators tend to ignore this element. Who are the members of this divine party? Why does Yahweh choose to

confuse the language *and* scatter the people? Will such confusion effectively block human communication? One must pay close attention to the actual language of the narrative. Yahweh's plan of confusion appears linguistically linked to the builder's original plan to create bricks. Because words are the construction material (לְבָנִים are דְּבָרִים) upon which human co-operation depends, Yahweh confuses the very linguistic foundations of the people's plan. In fact, the Divine Plan seeks nothing other than the absolute linguistic reversal of the plan set in motion by humanity. The builders want to make bricks (וְלִבְנָה); Yahweh responds by confusing (וְנָבְלָה) the people. *Here is an exact reversal.* Yahweh claims that the result of the confusion will be that a man will not 'hear' the language of his companion. Perhaps the attention to building materials noted above was not superfluous after all.

וַיִּפֶּץ יְיָ אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחְדְּלוּ לִבְנֹת הָעִיר

And Yahweh scattered them from there across the entire world. And they left off building the city.

The people's language confused, Yahweh also imposes dispersion upon them. There is no sense of a natural process taking place here. Yahweh responds with two distinct actions: he both confuses the language of the builders and also scatters them from the building site across the entire world.⁶² Such scattering is highlighted by the text's insistence that Yahweh scattered them "from there" over the whole face of the earth. Why are these two issues separated? Is it conceivable that Yahweh could not rely on the possibility that the imposition of various tongues would guarantee the suspension of the building program? Was the divine so fearful that human beings might, in fact, be capable of co-operation across linguistic boundaries that he insisted on imposing geographical boundaries as well? Did Yahweh, sensing the human drive for translation, need to disperse as well as confuse? Wenham collapses the two divine acts: "The confusion of languages prevents community living and technological cooperation: people can not trust or work with those they can not understand."⁶³ Linguistic differences certainly serve as boundary markers, but language is also a fluid border which is repeatedly crossed. People—ancient and modern—are perfectly capable of working across linguistic boundaries, even trusting those

⁶² These two distinct actions, in point of fact, serve as key evidence for Gunkel's argument that two-sources had been combined to form the present version of the narrative. In one version (the city narrative) the people are scattered while in another version (the tower narrative) the origin of linguistic diversity is at issue. H. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 94–99. Whether or not two stories have been combined in Gen 11, the effect is the same.

⁶³ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 245.

who speak another language. Is it possible, therefore, that the confusion of languages at Babel would not have been sufficient to prevent the continued building? Was dispersion also required?

The plan of Yahweh does not fail, however. The people cease building the city, but the text is silent with regard to the tower. What occurs with regard to the tower? The fact that the destruction of the tower—a near universal assumption in later interpretive (and artistic) renderings of Gen 11—is not even rendered by the biblical text can not be overstressed. Yahweh confuses and scatters which results in a suspension of activity on the part of humanity—but Yahweh does not destroy.

על־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ בָּבֶל בִּי־שָׁם בְּלֵל יי שְׁפַת כָּל־הָאָרֶץ וּמִשָּׁם הִפְצִים יי עַל־פְּנֵי
כָל־הָאָרֶץ

Therefore, its name is called Babel for there Yahweh confused the language of the entire world and from there Yahweh dispersed them across the entire world.

The narrative closes with an etiology. The plain of Shinar is explicitly connected to Babel (Babylon). The designation of the location is tied to the diversification of languages only; the dispersion does not have a corresponding etiology. This may be one reason why the narrative is principally known as the *Tower* of Babel. Once again, however, the narrator is quite insistent that there is no confusion of languages without dispersion. The two divine actions are part of a singular divine plan.

Having explored the tower narrative in a supposed literary isolation, what are we to make of this story? How would we answer the question: “What is this narrative about?” One of the central questions which must be addressed in this context is the identity of the central character or actor. In other words, is Gen 11:1–9 a story about humanity or a story about divinity?⁶⁴ Does the narrative mean to convey information about linguistic diversity or the origins

⁶⁴ Another character may even be present in the narrative. Ellen van Wolde has argued that the true focus of the tower narrative is neither humanity nor the divine. For van Wolde, the true center around which the narrative turns is ‘the whole earth.’ The Tower of Babel story is about the earth and its need to be populated by humanity. Commenting on the narrative frame (vs. 1 and 9), she states: “... in the framework of the story the changed/changing situation of the earth is referred to.” In addition, she points to the specificity of language with regard to the earth. “Only the earth is specified and is presented as many as five times as an independent subject, while the human beings stay in the shadow of the earth” (Ellen van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds: Semantic Studies in Genesis 1–11* [BibInt 6; Leiden: Brill, 1994], 44). The geocentric reading of Van Wolde, while interesting, does not answer any of the above ambiguities. In a real sense, her reading points the interpreter away from a focus on the motivations and intentions of the divine and human characters.

of nationality or the nature and purposes of the deity? Perhaps the narrative is about considerably more? An objective accounting of the material would divide the focus fairly evenly between the human and divine actors. Human beings migrate, find an appropriate location, and build a city and a tower. In the second portion of the narrative, the divine responds by inspection, refutation of the building program, confusion and dispersion of the builders. *In both portions of the narrative, ambiguity of intention and characterization is present.* As we have seen, there is very little indication of the underlying intention of the human beings. While the text claims they wish to make a name for themselves and avoid dispersion, the commentary literature surveyed to this point has made a great deal more of the means by which they attempt to accomplish these goals than the underlying meaning of the goals themselves. That is to say: the interpreters surveyed here spend the majority of their time exploiting the description of the tower “with its summit in the heavens” and speculating on what is implied by the desire to “make a name” and much less time and energy attempting to explain why the people should wish to remain together in one place to begin with. At this point, confined by the boundaries of the biblical narrative, we must remain somewhat agnostic with regard to the people’s motivation for remaining together. The question, however, will surface again and again in later Jewish interpretive literature. In one sense, the question will pose a problem to early interpreters precisely because it does not seem that the builders are attempting to do anything wrong at all. They are engaged, rather, in the creation of human community—something that should conceivably be laudatory. If the motivation of the people seems opaque and uncertain, the divine response is equally unclear. The second portion of the story begins with Yahweh descending to examine the city and the tower. It continues with a divine designation: the people are one and they possess one language. Such a situation is intolerable because limitation of human activity will no longer be possible. Why such limitation is desired by Yahweh cannot be determined from the narrative itself. Numerous questions—*multiple gaps*—surround the rationale for the divine “punishment” (including whether or not even to consider the scattering a punishment) and if or why the divine response is an appropriate one.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has sought to highlight the highly ambiguous nature of a well-known narrative from the Primeval History. This ambiguity takes a number

of forms: repetition, seemingly superfluous information, uncertain terminology and characterization, and gaps with regard to information. I have argued uncertainty of motivation is present throughout the narrative with regard to both the human and divine actors. I have also demonstrated how many modern commentators attempt to downplay such ambiguity. I have attempted to point to the manner in which modern commentators on Genesis draw on historical, literary and theological convictions in their desire to close the gaps and minimize the indeterminacies of the biblical narrative. Many readers of Gen 11 *want the narrative not only to utilize few words but also to speak in one voice*. In the next chapter, I will explore the tower narrative within both the Primeval History and the larger context of the canon of the Hebrew Bible. Some of the ambiguities noted in this chapter will be resolved; others will not. Even in those cases where reading with the canon appears to answer certain questions we will find later interpreters who ignore or reject the interpretive solutions offered by reading with the canon in favor of their own approaches. Babel remains a mysterious narrative.

CHAPTER TWO

READING BABEL BACKWARDS. CANONICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR EXEGETICAL EXPANSION

Reading is never a straightforward linear movement, a merely cumulative affair; our initial speculations generate a frame of reference within which to interpret what comes next, but what comes next may retrospectively transform our original understanding, highlighting some features of it and backgrounding others We read backwards and forwards simultaneously, predicting and recollecting.¹

שאין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה

There is no before or after in the Torah.²

1. *Introduction*

The two quotes which serve as preamble to the present chapter stand both in tension and continuity. The first citation, from a modern literary critic, occurs in a discussion of the contemporary movement, reception criticism, discussed at the beginning of the previous chapter. The second quote appears a number of times in rabbinic literature and expresses the exegetical notion that the chronological order of Scripture is only of *relative value* for the proper interpretation of Scripture. Any part of Scripture can be utilized to interpret any other portion. Both passages articulate, in different ways, the approach adopted in the present chapter.

In the first chapter I demonstrated that the narrative of the Tower of Babel can be read with a higher degree of ambiguity than many modern commentators will allow. I underscored how reading the text in literary

¹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (2d. ed.; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 67.

² *y. Meg.* 1.5; *b. Pes* 6b (with reference to when the Passover should be celebrated).

isolation—reading without the canon—permitted the uncertain and partial nature of the narrative to be seen clearly. I also illustrated how modern readers closed the gaps present in the narrative of Babel. In the current chapter, my focus shifts to reading ‘with the canon.’ Later chapters will explore in detail the transformation of the story of Babel into an account of idolatry, rebellion, hubris, oppression and even blasphemy. If these elements are not found (at least explicitly) in the biblical account itself, we may ask: do they have their foundations somewhere else in the biblical canon? To this end, I explore in the present chapter the tower narrative in two literary contexts. The first section reads Babel against the backdrop of the Primeval History found in Genesis 1–11. The second section is more wide-ranging as I explore texts throughout the remainder of the Hebrew Bible to determine how these other texts might inform a reading of Gen 11. The focus of this chapter shifts, in other words, from the gaps present in the narrative of Babel itself, to the biblical materials which could be used to fill in or close those gaps. At the same time, the present chapter attempts to hold apart *potential* canonical influence from the specifics of early Jewish readers. The following is a modern experiment attempting to read the narrative of Babel in light of the larger canon of the Hebrew Bible. The readings presented here serve as a foil to the analysis of actual early Jewish interpreters and their readings of Babel found throughout the remainder of the work. Possessing a solid image of the transformational and interpretive possibilities of the Babel narrative is meant to highlight and sharpen the focus on the distinctive translations of the tower presented in the remainder of the study. Ancient Jewish interpreters (no less than modern readers) were not only reading the story of Babel, they were also re-reading it through the lens of the entire Hebrew Bible. They were reading “backwards and forwards simultaneously, predicting and recollecting.”

The methodology applied here falls under the rubric of intertextuality. The term is a rather broad one, however. George Aichele and Gary Phillips suggest that “intertextuality enjoys an expansive, even contradictory, range of meanings.”³ Many literary critics lay just claim to the terminology. A highly conservative form of intertextual analysis (e.g., T.S. Eliot or H. Bloom), is only concerned with exploring how later texts interact with or respond to those works of art which came before them. Diachronic analysis is paramount. The focus is always on how later texts read (or mis-read)⁴ earlier texts.

³ George Aichele and Gary A. Phillips, “Introduction: Exegesis, Eisegesis, Intergesis,” in *Intertextuality in the Bible* (Semeia 69–70; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 8.

⁴ See Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). In

Within biblical studies, the terminology most often used for this approach is 'inner-biblical exegesis.' An approach informed by more post-modern thinking views all texts as inherently unstable—systems of signs—and concerns itself with the interactions between such texts and the cultures which encounter them. Diachronic concerns, while not unimportant, are minimal at best. The notion of what constitutes a 'text' here is also quite expansive. Any text can interact with any other text in multiple ways. Gail O'Day asserts that:

in biblical studies the narrower use of intertextuality—that is, patterns of literary borrowing among literary texts proper and textual relationships between specific literary corpora—is most prevalent.⁵

This is likely a result of the traditional critical bias for the study of the historical origin and development of the biblical text. More and more post-modern incarnations of intertextual study are present amongst biblicists, however. My own use of the language of intertextuality is meant to point to the interpretive possibilities created by the intersections of Gen 11 and other texts from the canon of the Hebrew Bible. I am not concerned mainly with *direction of influence*; rather, my interest is in the type of influence other biblical texts (whatever the chronological or canonical relationship to the Babel narrative) exert on the interpretation of Gen 11. I am focusing closely on actual texts from the canon.⁶ Early Jewish interpreters encountered Babel in the midst of a whole host of other biblical narratives, all of which (or none of which) could serve as potential inter-texts for reading Babel.

Translation studies offer insight in this regard. There is a marked difference between how native and non-native speakers encounter a language. Native speakers are able to access a whole host of connotations that are lost on even the most fluent of non-native speakers. Jonathan Culler states that:

when a speaker of a language hears a phonetic sequence, he is able to give it meaning because he brings to the act of communication an amazing repertoire of conscious and unconscious knowledge.⁷

Bloom's earlier work, *The Anxiety of Influence*, he claims that poets are *required* to misunderstand their predecessors in order to carve out creative space for their own artistic productions. Continuing creativity relies on misreading earlier works of art. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁵ Gail O'Day, "Intertextuality," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. John H. Hayes; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 1:547.

⁶ Later chapters will, in due course, explore the non-canonical contexts in which Gen 11 was encountered by early Jewish expositors.

⁷ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), 32.

The ability to read the narrative of Babel is premised upon a rather simple observation—the ability to decipher the vocabulary and syntax. But there is a great deal of ‘unconscious’ interpretation which must also take place in the reading of any narrative. The situation is even more marked when dealing with a closed canon. Particular words and phrases echoed strongly in the ears of early Jewish interpreters.⁸ The entire Hebrew Bible, as canon, contained for them one, coherent sacred story. Each part of that story could be interpreted in light of every other part. *It was all divine speech*. If we wish to understand how Jews in antiquity translated Babel, we must first seek to overcome Babel and hear Babel as a native might.⁹

⁸ I should also mention that I refer to textually-informed or scholarly interpreters within ancient Judaism. Those segments of ancient Jewish society that possessed limited knowledge of the actual Hebrew Bible *as text* would have had a very different relationship to biblical narrative than would many of the authors of the texts we will explore below. I do not mean to overly emphasize the difference between orality and literacy in ancient Judaism (the interplay between oral and written text was much more complex), only to assert that I am exploring the work of certain highly literate ancient Jewish interpreters. Thanks to Dr. William K. Gilders for suggesting this distinction (personal communication). For issues related to orality and literacy in ancient cultures in general: see Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982); for the relationship of orality and literacy to early Christianity and ancient Judaism, see Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: oral tradition and writer transmission in rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity* (trans. Eric J. Sharpe; Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); rabbinic texts have been studied by Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200BCE–400CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁹ One final proviso is necessary before setting out on our canonical journey: not every passage isolated in what follows will necessarily be exploited by early Jewish interpreters. It is only possible to demonstrate which biblical texts had an actual influence on early Jewish exegesis when those texts are explicitly cited and many of the inter-texts discussed herein are only implicit in ancient readings of Babel. They are presented here as “latent exegetical inter-texts”: passages that have the potential to affect but may or may not have affected early Jewish exegesis of Babel. Thus, while no interpreter may explicitly cite a given inter-text while discussing Babel, I do assume that the larger understanding of the narrative of Babel was influenced by many of the passages discussed below. This approach may be unsatisfactory to some. A more cautious approach would list as inter-texts *only those passages of Scripture explicitly cited by later interpreters*. It is my conviction, following Culler’s observation above, that a great deal of interpretation takes place at the unconscious level. Readers fill ‘gaps’ without realizing it. Very often, they would not be able even to articulate why they filled a particular gap in a certain manner. At any rate, my goal is not to *prove* that later interpreters were drawing on the inter-texts listed here but only to suggest that such inter-texts might conceivably influence later interpretation. Early interpreters were drinking from Scripture as from a fountain; certain hermeneutical moves and exegetical traditions were simply ‘in the water.’

2. *Primeval History: Babel and the History of Human Sin*

Genesis 1–11, the Primeval History, is an important context for interpreting the Tower of Babel. According to von Rad, Gen 11:1–9 is the “capstone” of the entire Primeval History. “Therefore, it has special significance in the context of the whole.”¹⁰ The narratives of Genesis 1–11 constitute central (although not exclusive) literary evidence for ancient Israelite mythological thinking about the origins of humanity and civilization. Later Jewish interpretive texts will be reading the tower narrative against the backdrop of larger beliefs and assumptions about the primeval period and in concert with the theological developments therein. As we have seen, even modern commentators such as Hamilton and Westermann do not interpret Gen 11:1–9 in isolation from the Primeval History. If anything, the larger focus and themes of the Primeval History have often (over)determined the meaning of the Tower of Babel narrative. There are a number of ways in which this literary context affects the interpretation of Gen 11. These include the introduction of chronological problems, lexical linkages, and the imposition of overarching theological paradigms. Each of these issues has a strong influence on the way the story of the Tower of Babel can be interpreted.

2.1. *The Origin of Nations*

The juxtaposition of Gen 11 with the so-called ‘Table of Nations’ in Gen 10 presents a challenge for exegetes. The Table of Nations purports to explain the spread of postdiluvian humanity according to the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japheth. On three separate occasions (Gen 10:5, 20, 31) the biblical text concludes a genealogy of one of the sons of Noah by claiming “these are the descendents of X, according to their clans and languages, by their lands and nations.” The most obvious interpretive problem surrounding this genealogical refrain is the tension it creates with the first verse of the tower narrative: “All the earth had one language ...” This problem, furthermore, can not be solved easily by recourse to source-critical analysis. While most scholars agree that the basic framework of Gen 10 is Priestly in origin, the final redaction of the present Pentateuch—including the Primeval

¹⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (trans. John H. Marks; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1961), 143. Von Rad actually argues for the penultimate theological placement of the narrative of the tower. He claims that the call of Abraham in Gen 12:1–3 is the actual conclusion of the Primeval History as the passage narrates the gracious response of God to the disobedience of the tower builders. See below for a fuller discussion.

History—is also considered to be Priestly.¹¹ One must explain, therefore, why the final redactor would have chosen to arrange the material in such a way that the Table of Nations would come *before* the story of the dispersion in Gen 11. Why was such chronological contradiction allowed to stand in the final work? There are a number of ways in which the dissonance between these two chapters is dealt with by modern scholars. Bruce Waltke claims that the Babel narrative is “a flashback that explains why the three sons of Noah became divided at the time of Peleg, son of Shem.”¹² He does not explain how the reader is supposed to recognize such a literary device. Umberto Cassuto seems to avoid the issue altogether: “This narrative constitutes ... the completion and sequel of the history of the sons of Noah.”¹³ Carol Kaminski, using the language of ‘dischronology,’ claims the redactor (or author) of the Primeval History is utilizing a literary technique well-known in antiquity.

Scholars have rightly observed that the circumstantial clause which introduces the Babel story ... takes the reader back to a period *prior* to the Table. This indicates, therefore, that even though the Table of Nations has been placed *before* Genesis 11:1–9, it actually follows the Babel story *chronologically*. While the ‘dischronology’ of the two texts has been problematic for some scholars, this need not be the case ... ‘dischronology’ is found in Egyptian and Assyrian texts, as well as in a number of biblical texts.¹⁴

While this is a rather sophisticated argument, relying on literary conventions of cognate literature from the ancient Near East, it remains flawed. The situation is more complicated than one of simple chronology. The two accounts are not only incompatible from a chronological perspective, but fundamentally disagree about the origin of linguistic diversity and early human expansion. The two chapters are opposed to one another in their very articulation. “Dischronology and Flashback” or “sequel and completion” do not address the problem that Gen 10 presents a calm and orderly distribution of humanity by genealogical strand while Gen 11 narrates a dramatic, divine intervention.

¹¹ For an overview of current theories concerning the Priestly Source, see Ernest Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 196–221.

¹² Bruce Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 175.

¹³ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part II From Noah to Abraham Genesis VI9–XI32* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1961; repr., Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1972), 225.

¹⁴ Carol M. Kaminski, *From Noah to Israel: Realization of the Primeaval Blessing After the Flood* (JSOTSup 413; London: T & T Clark, 2004), 85.

While the materials in chapters 10 and 11 are opposed to one another upon initial inspection, there are also a number of links which will be exploited by later interpreters who wish to bind these two sections together. The first connection is the *double reference* to the land of Shinar in Gen 10:10 and 11:2. The migration of the people in Gen 11 ends with their settlement on a plain in the land of Shinar.¹⁵ The Table of Nations also mentions Shinar as a definable territory. According to the Table, the land of Shinar is a larger territorial term that includes Babel, Erech, Akkad, and Calnah (Gen 10:10). More importantly, the kingdoms mentioned as constitutive of the land of Shinar are considered to be part of the territory ruled by Nimrod.¹⁶ The *later exegetical* association of the figure of Nimrod with the Tower of Babel has its roots in this connection between Gen 10:10 and 11:2. The reference to Nimrod is sufficiently odd in the context of the Table of Nations to draw the attention of early Jewish interpreters. In a genealogical framework the prosaic focus on Nimrod and the kingdoms over which he ruled is literarily jolting. Incorporated into the Table of Nations, furthermore, the present narrative makes Nimrod a grandson of Ham. This pedigree, given the evaluation of Ham in the Primeval History, will only add to the negative portrayal of Nimrod—and, subsequently, the builders of the tower—in later interpretation.¹⁷

Another link between the two chapters focuses on the ‘character’ of Peleg. According to Gen 10:25, Peleg is the son of Eber, a great-grandson of Shem. The Table of Nations contains one potential allusion to the tower narrative. After listing Peleg, the biblical text states that “in his days, the earth was divided” (כִּי בְיָמָיו נִפְלְגָה הָאָרֶץ). A number of possibilities exist for interpreting this short phrase. It is possible that the reference to Peleg and the tower builders as contemporaries is nothing more than a gloss by

¹⁵ To anticipate the broader canonical context, the land of Shinar is mentioned in a number of places throughout the Hebrew Bible (Gen 14:1–9; Isa 11:11; Zech 5:11; and Dan 1:2).

¹⁶ For a fascinating study of the pre- and post-biblical figure of Nimrod, see Karel van der Toorn and Pieter W. van der Horst, “Nimrod Before and After the Bible,” *HTR* 83 (1990): 1–29. A number of other works examine the prehistory of the passage in the Table of Nations. Nimrod is often viewed as a biblical remembrance of a royal and historical figure. See especially, E.A. Speiser, “In Search of Nimrod,” in *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11* (ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura; Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 4; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbraun, 1994), 270–277; Yigal Levine, “Nimrod the Mighty: King of Kish, King of Sumer and Akkad,” *VT* 52 (2002): 350–366.

¹⁷ Canaan, the son of Ham, is cursed by Noah (Gen 9:20–25) because his father “saw the nakedness” of Noah. The exact nature of this sin is the subject of much speculation among ancient and modern exegetes.

a later editorial hand. This scribe would have noticed the etymology of Peleg (division) and taken the opportunity to connect the two stories more closely. Source-critical issues also complicate the question. Westermann holds that Gen 10:25 is Yahwistic in origin but, from the perspective of tradition criticism, may be separate from Gen 11:1–9. Genesis 10:25 is not a later gloss which is attempting to harmonize, according to Westermann, but potentially an earlier independent tradition about the dispersion of humanity. He claims that:

what is meant is something like what is described in 11:1–9, although one can not say whether this remark in the genealogy has this or another intent. In any case, the sentence is an autonomous witness to an ancient narrative about the division of humanity in the early period, independent of 11:1–9.¹⁸

Whether Gen 10:25 is to be explored using tradition-historical categories or as an example of inner-biblical exegesis is ultimately irrelevant for understanding its hermeneutical importance. The passage links two portions of the biblical text together and allows for attempts to synchronize and develop characterization. This association is imprecise, however. It should be noted that the exact relationship between Peleg and the tower building is unclear. Genesis 10:25 uses an etiological form for the presentation of Peleg's name. He receives such a name *because* of what takes place during his life. This is not without some confusion. Could he have been given such a name at his birth unless the tower had only just been destroyed and the people scattered? If not, was his name changed at some point to reflect the catastrophe?¹⁹

2.2. *Making a Name*

We have already mentioned the builders' desire to "make a name" for themselves and the negative interpretation this goal receives in modern commentary literature. "Since *name* connotes fame and progeny, these city builders are futilely attempting to find significance and immortality in their own achievements," states Waltke.²⁰ How are we to account for the negative evaluation of the builders' desire to make a name? Is there any warrant for such interpretation outside of Gen 11?

¹⁸ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; CC; Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 526.

¹⁹ Two ancient interpretive traditions will attempt to adjudicate between these two options in their interpretation of Babel.

²⁰ Waltke, *Genesis*, 179.

Genesis 6:1–4 provides an interpretive possibility for ascertaining the builders' motivations. This short passage—what Gunkel called the “torso” of a narrative—relates the marriage of the sons of God to human females.²¹ This particularly opaque narrative proved to be a source for great speculation in much Jewish literature of the Second Temple period.²² The result of these illicit unions leads to the birth of the Nephilim and to Yahweh's decision to destroy humanity.²³ The Nephilim are characterized in the passage by two simple phrases: they are “heroes of old” and “men of renown.” Both phrases are evocative in Hebrew. The later phrase is a modern attempt to capture a Hebrew idiom—אֲנָשֵׁי הַשֵּׁם. The offspring of the divine and the human are characterized by the biblical text as “men of the name.” It is not difficult to understand, therefore, why later interpreters might experience negative connotations with regard to the word “name” as it occurs in the Primeval History. It is tied to human-divine hybrids who are potentially implicated as the cause of the deluge. The other term, however, is equally suggestive. The Nephilim are characterized as “heroes of old” or הַגִּבֹּרִים אֲשֶׁר מִקֶּדֶם. The key connection here is with Nimrod. Just as the Nephilim are characterized as הַגִּבֹּרִים, so too is Nimrod. Genesis 10:9 claims that Nimrod is גִּבּוֹר צֵיד לִפְנֵי יי. The exact translation of the phrase is an issue of some controversy. Most modern translations render the Hebrew phrase with reference to Nimrod's prowess as a hunter. He is a “mighty hunter before the LORD.” The element of concern at present is the terminology used both of Nimrod and the Nephilim. The term גִּבּוֹר is not particularly unusual in the Hebrew Bible. It generally denotes a hero of some sort.²⁴ Coming in close succession here, however, it is easy to read the two texts together. Nimrod can be viewed as a semi-divine empire builder who is concerned with the making of a name. The statement in Gen 6:4 that “it was then, and later too, that the Nephilim appeared on earth” might well also give the impression that the Nephilim somehow survived the waters of the flood.

Apart from these links, name making itself is prominent elsewhere in the Primeval History. Following the creation of Adam, Yahweh brings before his creature all the animals to see what he will call them. Whatever Adam called

²¹ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Mercer Library of Biblical Studies; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997), 59.

²² See Christopher Auffarth and Loren T. Stuckenbruck, eds. *The Fall of the Angels* (TBN; Leiden: Brill, 2004).

²³ P.W. Coxon, “Nephilim,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. Karel van der Toorn, et al; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 618–620.

²⁴ L. Kohler and W. Baumgartner, “גִּבּוֹר,” *HALOT* 1:175.

the creatures, “that was their name” (Gen 2:18). Human beings, while still living in Eden, were granted the ability to give names. While this prerogative does continue outside the gates of Eden—Adam names Eve, they both name their children—name giving becomes markedly more ambivalent. The first city-builder, Cain, calls the name of his civic creation after the name of his son, Enoch. Both city-building and name-granting are associated here with the primal fratricide. The Babel narrative itself is followed by the call of Abraham and the divine promise to make his name great. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the implication of all this might be that God, not humanity, is the one who bestows names.

2.3. *The ‘Sin’ of Babel*

A foundational question is whether or not the Babelites were engaged in something sinful. Even more directly, the concern is with determining the nature and extent of the sin. I have suggested above that the sin of Babel is a hermeneutical construction on the part of interpreters. The commentators—ancient and modern—speak with one voice. Such universal interpretation is highlighted by Ellen Van Wolde. She notes that “in respect of the meaning of the text all agree: the tower builders commit a sin against God.”²⁵ Despite the variety of interpretations and multiple readings of the text, the sin of the builders is *a priori* for almost all modern exegetes.²⁶ P.J. Harland assumes a sinful interpretation, while admitting that such an assumption is problematic. He states that, “in contrast to the other stories of the primeval history, the sin which the people commit is not made explicit.”²⁷ Although the sin is not explicit, for Harland its presence is not to be doubted. How are we to explain the assumption of sin, even on the part of commentators such as Harland who admit that—textually speaking—there is no sin?

I suggest two possibilities. It is possible to reason backwards from the divine ‘punishment’ to the sin of the builders by means of an *inverse exegetical calculation*. Readers can seek to uncover the *sin* of Babel through the *punishment* of Yahweh. The underlying thought is that the punishment is proportional to the (hypothetical) sin. If Yahweh scatters the people across the face of the earth, the sin must somehow include the people’s desire *not*

²⁵ Ellen Van Wolde, “The Tower of Babel as Lookout over the Primeval History,” in *Words Become Worlds: Semantic Studies of Genesis 1–11* (BibInt 6; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 84.

²⁶ See W. Creighton Marlowe, “The sin of Shinar (Genesis 11:4),” *EJT* 20:1 (2011): 29–39 for a recent reiteration of this approach. For the exception, see Theodore Hiebert, “The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World’s Cultures,” *JBL* 126 (2007): 29–58.

²⁷ P.J. Harland, “The Sin of Babel: Vertical or Horizontal,” *VT* 48 (1998): 515.

to be scattered, their desire to remain together in one place. The text is at least clear about this. But how is this fear a sin? Waltke claims that:

This skyscraper is a symbol of their united titanic societal self-assertion against God, who commands them to ‘fill the earth’ (9:1). These proud sinners, like Cain, fear a loss of place (i.e., existential meaning) both in their isolation from God and perhaps from one another. Like him, they find their solution for meaning in an abiding city rivaling God.²⁸

Notice that Waltke draws directly from the association of the tower builders with Cain and his city-building designs. The characterization of the Babelites, missing in the actual biblical narrative, is filled in by recourse to another infamous biblical figure.²⁹

There is an additional way of explaining the crime-and-punishment framework in which the tower narrative is generally read. The punishment is not meant to be punitive, but to be corrective. The interpretation (exculpation) hangs on the word *פִּרְץ/נִפֵּץ*. Genesis 1:28 contains the so-called Primeval Blessing. Yahweh charges humanity as follows: “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it.” It is the primeval will of the divine that humanity fill (*מִלֵּא*) the earth. The blessing is repeated again to Noah following the flood in Gen 9:1. There is an implicit equation which must be made between “filling the earth” and the builders fear that they will be “scattered” upon the face of the earth. What Yahweh conceives of as filling the earth (*מִלֵּא*) is conceived of as scattering (*פִּרְץ*) by the tower builders. Walter Brueggemann has articulated this opinion:

There is no doubt that in some contexts ‘scatter’ refers to exile and is a negative term (Ezek 11:17; 20:34, 41; 28:25). But here another denotation must be considered. Especially in chapter 10 (of Genesis), we have seen that ‘spreading abroad’ (v. 32) is blessed, sanctioned, and willed by Yahweh. It is part of God’s plan for creation and the fulfillment of the mandate in 1:28.³⁰

²⁸ Waltke, *Genesis*, 180.

²⁹ An additional reason is a bit more apologetic and confessional. Perhaps a theological agenda is at play: surely Yahweh would not punish without just provocation? Divine capriciousness is not a category generally entertained by modern exegetes. If the divine punishes, he must certainly have some reason. The question of the justness of God’s response at Babel will be a focus of rabbinic responses to Gen 11.

³⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 98. Nahum Sarna also holds this approach to the narrative of Babel with his claim that “man had fulfilled part of the divine blessing—‘be fertile and increase’—but he had balked, apparently, at ‘filling the earth.’ The building project was thus a deliberate attempt to thwart the expressed will of God, something that would interfere with the unfolding of the divine scheme of history. It is in this light that the sin of the builders must be viewed and the vexation of God be regarded” (Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* [New York: Schocken Books, 1966], 67).

Kaminski has recently argued against the easy equation of filling and scattering. She claims that:

Noah's descendants are not fearful of the commands to 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth,' since they constitute God's *blessing*. What they are fearful of, however, is being *scattered*, and being scattered is not to be equated with filling the earth.³¹

While I agree with Kaminsky that 'scattering' and 'filling the earth' are separate terms and that they point to different realities, I think she is somewhat too quick to dismiss the possibility that humankind might sometimes experience divine blessing as undesirable and problematic. Her point about the language of 'scattering' is well taken, however. In point of fact, the language of 'scattering' appears to operate in quite a specific range of meaning.

It is worth underscoring, however, that God never commanded Noah's descendants to *scatter*. That נָפַץ and פָּוֶץ do not occur in the primeval blessing is not surprising, given that scattering is commonly associated with divine *punishment* in the Old Testament. Scattering is even identified as one of the curses of the Mosaic covenant (Deut 28:64). We maintain, therefore, that it is inaccurate and somewhat misleading to suggest that the primeval commands, which constitute God's *blessing*, include the notion of *scattering*.³²

Even given the negative connotation with regard to scattering, it is not clear that the tower builders are rebelling against the divine plan for creation itself in their attempt to congregate and gather together in one place. Such a sin is hardly worth the name. Yes: the Babelites are engaged in an activity which is clearly problematic from the divine perspective; sin is another matter. There is nothing evil or malicious in this desire for human unity—it simply goes against that which the divine has willed for the created order.

One large thematic issue dominates ancient and modern interpretation of the Babel account. One of the signal contributions of Gerhard von Rad was to direct attention to a theological dynamic present throughout the entire Primeval History. Within the bounds of the initial eleven chapters of Genesis, humanity is continually blessed by the deity, only to disobey and rebel. In every case, Yahweh attempts to extend a second chance—the offer of *grace* in Christian theological terminology.³³ Human beings are cast out

³¹ Kaminski, *From Noah to Israel*, 28.

³² *Ibid.*, 28–29.

³³ Von Rad, *Genesis*, 148–150. Von Rad actually characterizes this theological dynamic with a citation from Paul's Letter to the Romans: "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom 5:20).

of Eden, and yet God makes clothes for them. All of creation is destroyed in a cataclysmic flood, while God singles out one man and his family to provide for a future. The Tower of Babel is treated by von Rad as the last defiant act of undifferentiated humanity. The scheme of human-sin and divine-grace in von Rad's theological construct virtually demands a highly negative interpretation of the builders of Babel. Their promethean action is precisely what spurs the deity to offer grace to humanity once again—this time, however, in the form of a covenant with one particular family among all the nations. The call of Abraham is built on the rubble of Babel. There can be no question of the sin of Babel on this interpretation.

3. *The Larger Canonical Context*

The contextual circle widens to include the larger canonical context in which Gen 11:1–9 can be read. The *biblical* context of the narrative of the tower is the second goal of this chapter. The authors of the interpretive texts which will be explored in the remainder of this study did not read the account of Babel in a literary or theological vacuum. Their knowledge of the entire biblical corpus—and many traditions outside of it—informed and shaped their re-telling of Babel. The larger canon of the Hebrew Bible provided, in many cases, the exegetical bricks necessary for the transformation and translation of the Babel narrative. If we wish to understand these transformations, we must also understand the literary contexts in which these early interpreters were reading. The situation, however, is more complex than what was encountered with regard to the Primeval History. We are not only looking for lexical connections or overarching theological systems; although sometimes those, too, are present. We are exploring certain *topoi*. What does the Hebrew Bible have to say about language differentiation elsewhere? In what other contexts are tall, human made structures discussed? Are there other biblical stories which share some of the same narrative elements encountered in the account of Babel? Can we speak of a biblical view of the city? What rhetoric does the Hebrew Bible use in connection with Babylon? These and other questions will be essential to understanding what follows.

There are two ways of focusing these particular questions, although these two approaches can not be separated rigidly. One approach explores *inner-biblical references* to the narrative of the Tower. Esther Marie Menn introduces the following definition of inner-biblical exegesis: “the phenomenon of biblical texts that seem to clarify, rework, or allude to identifiable

precursor texts, many of which are also preserved in the canonical corpus.”³⁴ Such an approach produces limited results with regard to Gen 11. It is difficult, although not impossible, to isolate texts in the remainder of the biblical corpus which seem to be commenting in any clear way on the tower narrative.³⁵ Where these texts do (or might) exist, however, we should explore how they would affect the interpretive possibilities with regard to the tower narrative. A second approach is broader in its application. Because it is often difficult (if not impossible) to determine if a later biblical text is truly an interpretive response to an identifiable precursor or merely uses much of the same language, intertextuality has been a remarkably generative approach for biblical studies in the past few decades. As stated above, intertextuality does not require the positing of chronological or even an intentional relationship between two texts. My own adoption of this approach attempts to examine the treatment of *key issues or themes* raised by Gen 11 throughout the remainder of the Hebrew Bible. There is no assumption with regard to this second approach that one text is commenting upon another. The two texts simply address a similar question or contain reflection upon a similar topic.

It is important to seek out these inter-texts before we turn our attention to the history of the interpretation of the tower. As already alluded to above, I will suggest that many of the interpreters examined throughout the remainder of this study are drawing on the inter-texts explored below in their translations of the tower. In most cases, however, they will not be doing so explicitly. No later interpreter of the Babel narrative will suggest that his reading of Gen 11 is being shaped by larger biblical rhetoric about (for example) the nature of cities or because of the negative portrayal of Babylon in the Hebrew Bible; they will, however, often cite as biblical *proof* for their own interpretations of Babel a text dealing with such topics.

³⁴ Esther Marie Menn, “Inner-Biblical Exegesis in the Tanak,” in *A History of Biblical Interpretation. Volume 1: The Ancient Period* (ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 56. The most detailed work on inner-biblical exegesis has been that of Michael Fishbane. In his work, he divides inner-biblical interpretation into three separate categories: legal, aggadic, and mantological. Most of the examples considered below may barely qualify as inner-biblical exegesis. Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

³⁵ See the discussion of Zeph 3 below for the key exception which proves the rule.

3.1. *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*

Genesis 28:10–22 relates the well-known story of the patriarch Jacob's over-night stay at Luz/Bethel. The patriarch, fleeing from the wrath of his brother Esau, comes upon a place where he experiences a divine visitation during his sleep. The narrative form of the two texts can be read in tandem. Both narratives involve the movement of someone or some group from one place to another; both Jacob and the Babelites are moving 'Eastward,' towards Mesopotamia. The group or person settles down. In addition, although this may seem too pedestrian to mention, in both narratives stones are mentioned. The Babelites, recall, use bricks *in place* of stones, while Jacob has a stone serve as a pillow. It is at this point that the heavenly and the earthly realms intersect. This is the most obvious connection between these two texts, that a nexus between heaven and earth is discussed. But there is also a profound difference. Whereas the builders of Gen 11 seek to construct a tower with its head in the heavens of their own initiative, Jacob's epiphany centers on a 'ladder' or 'stairway' whose top (only?) reaches to the sky and is revealed to Jacob at God's discretion.³⁶ *Human initiative is contrasted with divine revelation.*³⁷ The Hebrew phrase used to describe the 'ladder' is suggestive of another difference. The edifice witnessed by Jacob stretches/reaches *towards* the heavens (וְרָאֲשׁוֹ מִגֵּיעַ הָשָׁמַיְמָה). There is no suggestion—contra Gen 11—that the top of the structure might actually be located in the heavens (although the angels going up and down on the structure certainly imply that such was the case). The appearance of the ladder is followed by a visitation by the deity who makes the following promise to Jacob: "you shall spread out (פִּרְצֶתָ) to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south." One interesting observation is that anytime the lines between heaven and earth are breached, it appears peoples will spread out further upon the earth. Even more: the result of this divine blessing is identical to the promise given to Abram in Gen 12:3. "All the families of the earth" will bless themselves by means of the family of Abram/Jacob. It is even possible to imagine—but impossible to prove—that Babel and Bethel

³⁶ There is, of course, a marked difference in terminology. The Babelites attempt to build a מִגְדָּל (a term which occurs throughout the Hebrew Bible), while Jacob witnesses a סֶלֶם (a hapax legomenon).

³⁷ Interestingly, von Rad claims that the narrative in its present form is the result of the merging of two different narratives—not unlike the tower narrative. He claims that "the dream is now a masterful combination of originally two nocturnal revelations, namely, the 'ladder to heaven' (vs. 12) and the Yahweh manifestation (vs. 13 ff.), a combination no longer perceptible to the unschooled reader of the Bible" (Von Rad, *Genesis*, 278–279).

are two version of the same narrative—one presented in positive language as the etiology for the people of Israel, another presented negatively as an example of human hubris.

A final connection between the two stories is the declaration of Jacob that “this is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.” Modern commentators inform us that Babel originally meant ‘gateway of the gods’ in Akkadian; it was only the biblical narrator who punned on the meaning of the term to produce the equation between Babel and ‘confusion.’ What connotations are made possible by reading these two texts together? The focus on the phrase “head in the heavens” is amplified in comparison with the description of the ladder at Bethel. *Human ambition* and the concomitant *scattering* of the people over the *whole earth* is contrasted with *divine revelation* and the granting of a *blessing and fruitful spreading* of descendents across a *limited body of territory*. The episode at Babel led to a fragmentation of human community, the revelation at Bethel to the blessing and protection of the community of Israel. The story of Jacob’s ladder is, in its own way, a mirror image of the account of Babel.

3.2. *The Exodus and Babel*

The second group of inter-texts under consideration is from the very beginning of Exodus. We noted above that it has been common to read Gen 11:3 as evidence of the foreign origin of the tower narrative. The need to translate the building materials of brick and bitumen into stone and mortar has both pointed to the Babylonian origin of the original myth and underscored the native Israelite point-of-view present. But this focus on “brick for stone and bitumen for mortar” has distracted interpreters from another connection. The term utilized for brick and brick-making in Gen 11:3 is not a common one in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, the word לִבְנָה, referring to bricks, occurs mainly in one other context: the Egyptian bondage of the children of Israel.³⁸ There are three references of interest. Exodus 1:14 relates the oppression of the Israelites under the genocidal Pharaoh who knew not Joseph. Such oppression is characterized by the biblical text as “difficult labors” (עֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה). The exact nature of these labors is even made explicit. It includes “mortar and bricks” (בָּהֶמָר וּבִלְבָנִים)—precisely the building materials which are dis-

³⁸ The term is also found in Isa 9:9, Exod 24:10, Isa 65:3 and Ezek 4:1. With the possible exception of Isa 9:9, it is unlikely that any of the remaining references to bricks has any hermeneutical contribution to make.

cussed in Gen 11:3. Additionally, following the initial appearance of Moses and Aaron before another Pharaoh, the irate leader charges his taskmasters with increasing the quotient of bricks (לִבְנִים) produced by the Israelites (Exod 5:6–9). Given the sparse occurrence of the word bricks in the biblical corpus, it should come as no surprise if one later interpreter (Philo of Alexandria) saw brick-making and bricks as short-hand for any sort of oppressive labor. Or, more directly, as code talk for paradigmatic oppression. The seemingly superfluous nature of the phrase in Gen 11:3 is also potentially answered. Why would the divine relate that “brick was to them for stone and bitumen for mortar?” Is the deity really that concerned with building supplies? Later readers could argue that “brick and bitumen” were code words, placed into the text by the divine, for later de-coding. Genesis 11 read in isolation certainly does not present the building of the Tower of Babel as an act of oppression by one group against another—in fact, it suggests just the opposite! The tower is the unified work of all humanity.

The reference to bricks and bitumen, furthermore, is not the only connection between these two stories. An additional, implicit, connection exists between the protagonists in the two accounts. The builders of the tower—that democratic group discussed above—open the dialogue about construction with the word הֵבֵה—Come! The occurrence of this particular word is somewhat more common in the Hebrew Bible than the reference to bricks and bitumen. It is not entirely pedestrian, however. For our purposes, it is interesting to note that the first act undertaken by the Pharaoh who knew not Joseph was to call together all of the people in an attempt to deal with what he perceived to be an Israelite problem. This convocation of Egyptians is opened with the same word uttered by the builders of Babel, Come—הֵבֵה. There are two elements of this connection which I wish to highlight. First, one should concede, the presence of הֵבֵה in both the Babel narrative and the first chapter of Exodus is a rather weak link. Bolstered by the presence of the rare term brick and bitumen, however, the connection is somewhat stronger. For the native reader of the biblical text, there is *potentially* a tingling in the ears when someone speaks the word הֵבֵה. One may expect to hear something proposed that is problematic from the divine perspective. The motivation of the tower builders suddenly seems less innocent. Secondly, on the lips of a genocidal Pharaoh, the word הֵבֵה takes on a more sinister tone; it now carries with it the sense of us and them. Whereas the builders are an unmarked group in Gen 11, later readers will find it hard to believe that some sort of oppression and compulsion was not present. My argument is that the *literary experience* of oppression in Egypt has the potential to color later Jewish readings of the Tower of Babel. Reading backwards

from Exodus to Genesis, it is possible to argue that no one can join together to build with bricks without oppression being somewhere in the plans.

3.3. *Towers in the Hebrew Bible*

The description of the Tower of Babel is both clarified and complicated by reading in the context of the canon. The image of *tower/migdal* (מִגְדָּל) itself is more complex in the Hebrew Bible than might be assumed at first. The term contains within itself the Hebrew verb ‘to be big.’ A *migdal*, therefore, could be any sort of large structure. Given the later exegetical tendency to treat the tower at Babel as an affront against the deity, we should enquire as to the larger potential connotation of the term ‘tower’ in the Hebrew Bible. Connotation, by nature, is difficult to nail down. Hamilton is representative of modern commentators’ brief (and somewhat slanted) treatment of the term when he states:

migdal normally refers to a fortified tower or acropolis (Judg 8:9, 17; 9:46–52; Ps 48:13 [Eng. 12]; 61:4 [Eng. 3]; Ezek 26:9). In Isaiah especially *migdal* is a symbol of strength and pride (Isa. 2:15; 30:25; 33:18), and thus what it represents is abhorred by God (Isa. 25:2–3). The impression created is that these builders are meglomaniacs.³⁹

This impression, of course, is only created if one chooses to interpret Gen 11 in light of such negative evaluations of the term *migdal*. The problematic nature of the *migdal* of Babel is amplified by other expositors’ connection of the Hebrew term to the Mesopotamian structure known as the *ziggurat*. The tower builders are thereby implicated in non-Israelite religious practices. Even terminology is not allowed to get in the way of a good exegetical argument. John H. Walton has argued that the tower is to be equated with a Mesopotamian *ziggurat*. He states that:

The frequent objection that the Hebrew term מִגְדָּל is used primarily in military contexts or as a watch tower, but never used of a *ziggurat*, is easily addressed on three fronts. 1. We do not expect to see the term מִגְדָּל used of *ziggurats* in Hebrew because the Israelites did not have *ziggurats*. 2. We do not expect the Israelites to have a ready term for *ziggurats* because *ziggurats* were not a part of the Israelite culture. 3. Given the absence of a term in Hebrew, we would expect them to either borrow the word if they had to talk about them, use a suitable existing term, or devise a word. To call the *ziggurat* a tower is not inaccurate.⁴⁰

³⁹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 353.

⁴⁰ John H. Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Account and Its Implications,” *BBR* 5 (1995): 155–156.

Neither, however, is it entirely accurate. The remainder of Walton's work is an attempt to picture the Tower of Babel as an actual and historical Mesopotamian ziggurat. His reconstruction of the location of the ziggurat within Mesopotamian theology serves as the background against which he interprets the actions of the Babelites and the response of the Israelite deity. Equating the *migdal* of Babel with the Mesopotamian ziggurat opens one fruitful avenue of interpretation for Gen 11, but it equally derails a number of other exegetical approaches.

A better method is to explore the meaning of the term *migdal* in its biblical contexts. The actual diversity of the biblical material connected to the term 'tower' is impressive and allows for multiple interpretive options. I would divide the references to *migdal* into three categories.⁴¹ There are some passages where *migdal* appears hermeneutically neutral. It is a simple reference to a tall structure—nothing more, nothing less (e.g., 2 Kgs 18:8; 2 Kgs 9:17; Song 4:4 and 8:10 [as a description of certain features of the poet's beloved]). There are also, however, hermeneutically negative and hermeneutically positive contexts in which the term is encountered.

Many occurrences of *migdal* in the biblical corpus are positive. Towers serve as fortification (2 Chron 14:6) allowing the people of Jerusalem to be safe from the other nations around them. They are used as storage (1 Chron 27:25) for the economic powerhouse of the United Monarchy. A late biblical author can even utilize them to offer a panegyric upon a Judean king. Uzziah assumed the throne of Judah at age sixteen and "did what was pleasing to the LORD, just as his father Amaziah did" (2 Chron 26:4). One of the central accomplishments of Uzziah was his Judean-construction projects. He built many towers.

Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem; He built towers in the wilderness and hewed out many cisterns; He made clever devices in Jerusalem, set on the towers and on the corner, for shooting arrows and larger stone. (2 Chron 26:9, 10, 15)

This is all presented in a very positive fashion. The fact that the text goes on to narrate the downfall of Uzziah due to arrogance may also be important, however. The towers of Jerusalem can serve as a source of comfort and devotion according the author of Ps 48. The psalmist invites an un-named entity to "walk around Zion; circle it. Count its towers, take note of its

⁴¹ These categories are not absolutely separate. An initial reference may appear positive (or at least neutral), only to be qualified by the continuation of the narrative. It is not clear in these cases whether the later negative element should attach to the 'tower' or whether we are really encountering a hermeneutical coincidence.

ramparts; go though its citadels, that you may recount it to a future age" (Ps 48:13–14). The larger psalm is concerned with the beauty and security provided by Mount Zion and the presence of Yahweh on the holy mountain. The towers bear testimony to such divine presence and protection.

An additional text appears to present a positive view of 'towers.' On closer inspection, this may not be the case. Isaiah 5:1–7 is widely known as the Song of the Vineyard. In this poem, the prophet presents the history of Yahweh's beneficence to Israel by analogy to a vine-dresser. The poem first recounts the gracious acts of the deity before presenting a divine judgment against the ungrateful people. One of the first acts of the deity is the construction of a 'watchtower' (according to the JPS translation). *Migdal* in this context is certainly positive. It is a divine gift given by Yahweh to his people.⁴² But therein is the exact interpretive problem. It is a gift given and constructed by Yahweh. "He built a watchtower in its midst" (וַיִּבֶן מִגְדָּל בְּתוֹכֹוֹ) (Isa 5:2). The later hermeneutical implication might be that only divine initiative is appropriate with regard to the construction of such fortifications.

There are, moreover, some clearly negative references connected with the term *migdal*. 2 Kings 17 attempts to recount why the northern kingdom of Israel succumbed to the invading Assyrian army in 722 BCE. In theological terms, the ten tribes were taken into exile because "they sinned against the LORD their God ... they worshipped other gods and followed the customs of the nations which the LORD had dispossessed" (2 Kgs 17:7–9). This charge is stereotypically deuteronomistic. What is relevant hermeneutically is the continuation of the charge:

The Israelites committed against the LORD their God acts which they knew were not right: They built for themselves shrines in all their settlements, from watchtowers to fortified settlements; they set up pillars and sacred posts for themselves on every lofty hill and under every leafy tree. (2 Kgs 17:9–10)

The construction of tower is here placed in exegetical company with the most base and stereotypically idolatrous sins. A most negative use of 'tower' is found in Isa 2:12–15. "For the LORD of Hosts has ready a day against all that is proud and arrogant (עַל כָּל־גִּזְאָה וָרִם) ... Against every soaring tower and every mighty wall." The larger point of this prophetic invective is to

⁴² Blenkinsopp cautions against an overly allegorical reading when he claims that "it is unlikely that the detailed allegorical reading of Ibn Ezra and other medieval exegetes (e.g., removing stones = extirpating the Canaanites, the watchtower = the temple) was intended by the author" (Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation and Commentary* [AB 19; New York: Doubleday, 2000], 207). I will argue that a later translator of the tower, Flavius Josephus, does make an analogy between the Tower of Babel and the Jerusalem Temple.

assert that Yahweh will bring low those who esteem themselves highly. The choice of *migdal* as a physical emblem of such overweening human pride and arrogance could easily prejudice later readers of Gen 11 to treat the Babelites with suspicion and outright contempt. While it is safe to conclude that *migdal* often carries questionable connotations in the larger corpus of the Hebrew Bible, such negative evaluations can be overstated and should not be seen as absolute. Early Jewish interpreters were not *obligated* to treat ‘tower’ as evocative of arrogance. That many of them did, however, is undeniably the case.

Connotations aside, Gen 11 does not use the word *migdal* without some further clarification. As we have seen, the tower is sparsely described in the biblical narrative with the phrase וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַּשָּׁמַיִם. A literal translation of the phrase is “with its head in the heavens.” We noted above that the phrase might be read in a less literal fashion. Perhaps the phrase is just one way of saying very, very, very tall. Hamilton claims that “it is clear from other ... passages [in the Old Testament] that the expression ... is figurative language to describe edifices of impressive and monumental proportions.”⁴³ Commentators often point to the presence of the phrase in Deut 1:28 and 9:1 as proof. The first text contains a reiteration of the initial report of the Israelite spies who had been sent to raconteur the land of Canaan. Moses chastises the people for their previous lack of faith in Yahweh and reminds them of their response to the inhabitants of Canaan. “We saw there a people stronger and taller than we, large cities with fortifications to the heavens, and even Anakites.” The second text from Deuteronomy reads: “Hear, O Israel. You are about to cross the Jordan to go in and disposes nations greater and more populous than you: great cities, fortifications to the heavens” (וְבָצֵרֶת בַּשָּׁמַיִם) (Deut 9:1). While I agree that the *modern* interpreter is justified in reading the reference to the ‘heavens’ as an idiom for tall, we must also ask what the *native reader* of the text would experience.

Commentators have not paid sufficient attention to the contexts in which this particular phrase occurs. In this instance Moses is charging the people of Israel with the destruction of the native inhabitants of Canaan. The people of Israel are not to glory over their dispossession of the indigenous population. Rather, Yahweh is granting the land to the Israelites because of the wickedness of those nations. The Hebrew Bible is quite explicit about the great evils posed by the native inhabitants of the Promised Land (e.g., Deut 7). This group of evil-doers, curiously enough, was apparently quite

⁴³ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 353.

skilled at building cities with defensive structures which stretched towards the heavens. The tower builders may have been attempting literally to build a structure which stretched all the way to the heavens or they may have only been attempting to build very, very tall fortifications. The distinction does not ultimately matter from a hermeneutical perspective.

3.4. *A Question of Character*

One of the key elements of gap-filling discussed above dealt with the issue of ambiguous characterization. Two biblical passages inform the characterization of God and of the Babelites, respectively. The first inter-text is from the book of Job. A central question encountered earlier dealt with Yahweh's apparent alarm at the people's attempt to build a tower with its top in the heavens. God claims that the city and tower are only the beginning of the people's work and that "nothing that they propose to do will now be withheld from them" (Gen 11:6). What is meant by this phrase? There are two terms present in Gen 11:6 which are somewhat rare. These words, *וְיָמַם* and *בְּצִיר*, occur *together* only here in Genesis and once in Job.⁴⁴ In the Joban passage, the terms occur at the climax of the work as the protagonist responds to the voice of Yahweh from the whirlwind. "Job said in reply to Yahweh: 'I know that you can do everything, that nothing you propose is impossible for you'" (*וְלֹא-יִבְצֵר מִמֶּךָּ מְזִמָּה*) (Job 42:1–2). The ability to devise without any restraint is presented by the author of Job as a peculiarly divine activity. God, not humanity, is capable of planning beyond any limits. One dominant tendency is to utilize the language to express the fundamental sin of the tower builders. Westermann provides an interpretation along this line that posits that the pairing of the two-terms is a reference to a well-known doxology in ancient Israel. He states:

[T]he meaning of God's reflection in Gen 11:6 thereby becomes clear; there is the fear that people could become like God ... it looks as though there is a fixed formula behind these two verses ... it would be a formula of the praise of God. Echoes of the praise of God, known to listeners, in a reflection of God that is the basis of an intervention against humankind, throw into still sharper relief that it is against human presumption, albeit only feared, that God must intervene.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ The word *וְיָמַם* is also often thought to have a negative connotation. Wenham holds that "the verb 'to plot' tends either to be used of God (e.g., Jer 4:28; 51:12) or of nefarious human scheming (Deut 19:19; Ps 31:14; 37:12)" (Wenham, *Genesis*, 241).

⁴⁵ Westermann, *Genesis*, 551.

Yahweh's estimation of the Babelites points to their attempt to usurp a clear divine prerogative. Any and all human attempts to imitate the divine in its unlimited manner are forbidden. They are, in the language of Gen 3, humanity attempting to become "like God." Such an association can not be a positive one for later interpretations of Babel.

A passage from the book of Psalms is also instructive for later attempts to specify the exact character of the Babelites. Psalm 55 is a song of individual lament in which the psalmist cries out to Yahweh for protection from enemies.

בִּלְעַ אֲדֹנִי פִּלְגַּ לְשׁוֹן נָם
כִּי־רָאִיתִי חֶמְס וְרִיב בְּעִיר
יוֹמָם וּלְיָלָה יִסּוּבָבָהּ עַל־חוֹמֹתֶיהָ
וְאֶזְנוֹ וְעַמָּל בְּקִרְבָּהּ הוּוֹת בְּקִרְבָּהּ
וְלֹא־יָמִישׁ מִרְחָבָהּ תֵּדָב וּמְרָמָהּ

O Lord, confuse and divide their speech. For I see violence and strife in the city.

Day and night upon its walls they circle; evil and mischief are in its midst; malice and deceit is within it; fraud and deceit never leave its square.

(Ps 55:10–12)

There are a number of connections to highlight between this passage and the narrative of Babel. The first connection is the most striking. Both passages speak of the confusion of language.⁴⁶ For the moment we will set aside the question of why the psalmist would wish his adversaries to have their speech confused. There are a number of differences in terminology. The Psalmist presents Yahweh confusing the language of the people through the use of the verb בִּלְעַ and the noun לְשׁוֹן. By contrast, the Babel narrative uses the verb בָּלַל and the noun שְׂפָפָה. While it is possible to claim that the differences present should carry some exegetical weight, I believe that the inclusion of the term divide (פִּלְגַּ) strengthens the connection between Genesis 10–11 and Ps 55.⁴⁷ Having made a connection between the two biblical

⁴⁶ There is some debate regarding how best to translate the first line of the Hebrew in the various commentaries. Recently Hossfeld and Zenger claim that "the Piel פִּלְגַּ in the sense of 'divide' or 'split' is unique" (Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* [trans. Linda M. Maloney; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005], 51).

⁴⁷ The exact nature of this connection is unclear. It is possible to argue that Ps 55 is an example of inner-biblical allusion and is referring back either to the text of Gen 11 or to a similar oral tradition. The location of the verses within the larger psalm, however, makes such an argument difficult. The connection is more likely a general intertextual one.

passages, one can now read the two accounts in light of each other. What does Ps 55 have to communicate about the Babel builders?

We can perform a sort of inverse exegetical equation. If the psalmist wishes the people to be punished by the confusion and division of their speech, what crimes call forth such a wish? The psalmist is happy to tell us. Violence and strife (חֶמְס וְרִיב) are present in the city.⁴⁸ The reference to 'city' is another connection between these two passages. (We will turn to this theme shortly.) The psalmist paints an image of a city entirely devoted to evil and malice. This city is one in which the very nature of civilized society has been corrupted. The only way to halt such corruption is through a divine intervention which will prevent those responsible from communicating—conspiring?—with one another. The builders of Babel are no different. Because they are punished by Yahweh with the confusion of language, they must be guilty of the same sins enumerated by the psalmist. The 'sin' of Babel can be given greater specificity and texture by reading these two narratives in tandem.

It is important to grasp the hermeneutical assertion here. What I am suggesting—that this particular psalm could have been utilized to provide additional information about the builders of Babel—is consistent with what is known of the how the book of Psalms was read in many circles of Second Temple Judaism. *Individual psalms came to be associated with events in the life of Israel.* Such an association is possible because Psalms came to be viewed as more than a book of poetry or liturgy. A late midrashic collection actually considers the traditional author of the Psalms, David, to be a prophet who sees into the future and, paradoxically, the past. Esther Marie Menn, in her study of *Midrash Tehillim*, states:

Perhaps surprising in light of our common understanding of prophetic clairvoyance as clear vision concerning the future is the additional information that David's inspired poetry supplies about the formative past in *Midrash Tehillim*, including the period of the patriarchs, the exodus, and the receiving of the law at Sinai ... we may have to adjust our idea about the direction of clairvoyance to understand how in *Midrash Tehillim* David's prophetic gift allows him to see the past clearly.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ One recurring transformation of the Babel account in early Jewish texts is the assumption of violence and factional strife between the builders. See the discussion of Pseudo-Philo's version of Babel below, Chapter Four.

⁴⁹ Esther Marie Menn, "Sweet Singer of Israel: David and the Psalms in Early Judaism," in *Psalms in Community: Jewish and Christian Textual, Liturgical, and Artistic Traditions* (ed. H. Attridge and Margot E. Fassler; Symposium; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 73.

Menn could have added Ps 55 as an example of David's past-oriented-clairvoyance extending all the way to the primeval age.⁵⁰ It is also the case that much of the prophetic literature—select passages from Isaiah, Jeremiah and others—will also be treated as references equally to the past and to the future.

4. *Cities, Speech, and the End of Days*

The above quote from Ps 55 raises a number of larger issues that must be addressed. The psalm refers both to the confusion of language and to the image of the city as a place of evil, mischief, fraud and deceit. Both of these issues—language and the urban experience—have important implications for reading and interpreting the Tower of Babel narrative.

4.1. *The Image of the City in the Hebrew Bible*

As has already been mentioned, the *Tower of Babel* is something of a misnomer in relation to Gen 11. It should be recalled that the builders seek to build a city *and* a tower. It is only the city, furthermore, that is mentioned in the closing verse of the narrative. There has been a great deal of work done on the city in ancient Israel.⁵¹ For our purposes, however, we are concerned with the place occupied by 'cities' on the mental maps of ancient biblical exegetes.⁵² Our concern is not with any historical city, but with how the very notion of city would have been constructed. Grabbe claims that "although there have been many studies of cities as spatial, political, and social entities, cities also constituted symbolic, theological, and ideological constructs."⁵³ He goes on to claim that "cities are not just physical entities but constructs of the human mind."⁵⁴ Perhaps the modern mind has been

⁵⁰ We will see below that Ps 55 was not the only psalm brought forth to explain the account of Babel to a later generation of readers. One Jewish interpretive work, *Pirque de Rabbi Eliezar*, places the words of Psalm 55 on the lips of Abram (*Pirque R. El.* 24). He curses the builders of Babel and calls for divine assistance in halting their construction project.

⁵¹ Frank S. Frick, *The City in Ancient Israel* (SBLDS 36; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977); Lester L. Grabbe and Robert Haak, eds. *'Every City shall be Forsaken': Urbanism and Prophecy in Ancient Israel and the Near East* (JSOTSup 330; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

⁵² See F.V. Greifenhagen, *Egypt on the Pentateuch's Ideological Map: Constructing Biblical Israel's Identity* (JSOTSup 361; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) for a useful model of how mental maps can be used in biblical studies.

⁵³ Lester L. Grabbe, "Introduction and Overview," in *'Every City shall be Forsaken'*, 23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

captivated by the tower with its head in the heavens, but what of the city as the bulwark against dispersion?

The (concept of the) city is a problematic entity in the Hebrew Bible. Such an assertion is easily underscored by the fact that the first city mentioned in the Hebrew Bible was founded by the fratricide Cain (Gen 4:17). While *the city* is possibly rehabilitated by the theology of the City of David later in the Hebrew Bible, ambivalence clings to the word. Some scholars have even claimed that the Hebrew Bible preserves an anti-urban bias. Robert Wilson has argued strongly against this purported anti-urban bias. He claims that “the major difficulty with this view ... is that it can not be found in the Old Testament.”⁵⁵ Wilson is arguing, however, against a somewhat rigid (and now dated) scholarly understanding of the view of the city in the Hebrew Bible. This scholarly tradition associates early Israel with nomadic groups who were suspicious of the city and urban culture which they associated with oppression. Israel only gradually made peace with the notion of city, according to this view. Wilson’s argument, in short, is that the Hebrew Bible actually possesses a whole host of attitudes with regard to the city. The city—like every other human creation—is a mixed blessing. Nowhere is this ambivalence more apparent for Wilson than with regard to the story of Babel.

The Israelite historian’s notion that the city was both creative and destructive is further developed in the famous story of the tower of Babel. On the one hand, the city and its tower are depicted as monuments to human creativity, organization, and skill. In the middle of an unproductive and potentially hostile plain, the builders make for themselves a refuge, using all the technological skills traditionally associated with cities But the Israelite historian realizes that this ideal view of the city cannot match the reality. The writer therefore describes how God alters the grandiose plans of the builders, in the process underscoring all the city’s imperfections.⁵⁶

While Wilson is correct to highlight the wide range of biblical attitudes towards the city in the Hebrew Bible, within the book of Genesis at least, there is very little positive press with regard to the city. The first city is founded by Cain. Following Babel, we next encounter the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The narratives of Genesis 18–19 certainly do nothing to improve the biblical view of ‘city.’ It remains an inhospitable place where

⁵⁵ Robert R. Wilson, “The City in the Old Testament,” in *Civitas: Religious Interpretations of the City* (ed. Peter S. Hawkins; Scholars Press Studies in the Humanities Series, 10; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 5.

⁵⁶ Wilson, “The City in the Old Testament,” 7.

truly righteous people do not dwell. The next encounter with the city occurs in Gen 34 with the story of the rape of Dinah. At least in the book of Genesis, no case can be made for the value of the city as an institution. It is, rather, always portrayed as a place of danger and (sexual) domination. There is no positive view attached to the city.

4.2. *Language, Speech, and the Biblical Tradition*

Another possible influence on pre-modern interpreters of Babel would be the treatment of language and speech in biblical texts. There are two ways in which I would limit the discussion which follows. (1) I am interested in the phenomenon of linguistic diversity *per se*. My focus here is not on questions related to the 'original' language spoken by the Babelites and those who came before them.⁵⁷ This will be an important issue for later interpreters, but will not be discussed here. (I will cover this issue as appropriate in the later chapters.) Rather, my concern is with how ancient Israelites thought and spoke about the undeniable reality of linguistic diversity. Was it a positive or negative cultural reality? In what contexts do we encounter references to linguistic plurality? (2) What is spoken is just as important as the language in which one is speaking. The *content of speech* or *characterization by sins related to speech* will be discussed below and make an appearance as well in later interpretive traditions.

Is it possible to speak of the rhetoric of speech and language in the Hebrew Bible? As preamble to her work on ancient Greek notions of the origins of language and society, Deborah Gera claims that:

much of Greek thinking about questions of language and society is presented only incidentally and relevant passages are scattered in a wide range of classical sources.⁵⁸

The biblical sources at our disposal are even vaguer with regard to how linguistic difference and its relationship to human society were viewed in ancient Israel. Most casual readers of the Tower of Babel narrative associate the story with the origin of language diversity. The Hebrew Bible, however, does not have a developed notion of linguistic difference. Genesis 10 and 11

⁵⁷ See Milka Rubin, "The Language of Creation or the Primordial Language: A Case of Cultural Polemics in Antiquity," *JJS* 49 (1998): 306–333. Rubin's study moves far beyond the realm of biblical studies, but is an excellent overview of claims in antiquity (early and late, Jewish, Christian and Islamic) to cultural superiority by appeal to the biblical text.

⁵⁸ Deborah Levine Gera, *Ancient Greek Ideas on Speech, Language, and Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), vii.

provide the only extant material which clearly points to Israelite thinking about the origin of language difference; even in these cases, however, it is not clear that the language difference *as such* is of central interest to the biblical narrator. There are a number of texts scattered throughout the Hebrew Bible, however, which do discuss language diversity. Two main ways are characteristic of how language difference is addressed in the Hebrew Bible, one negative, the other positive.

The negative element is highlighted in a number of texts mainly stemming from the deuteronomistic tradition. Deuteronomy 28:49 offers an excellent example. A number of curses are listed in Deut 28. One such threat issued by Yahweh relates to a foreign nation coming against the Israelites.

The LORD will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, which will swoop down like the eagle—a nation whose language you do not understand (גוי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִשְׁמַע לְשֹׁנוֹ). (Deut 28:49)

The passage seems almost a stock phrase. A similar threat is issued by the prophet Jeremiah.

I am bringing against you, O House of Israel, a nation from afar, declares the LORD. It is an enduring nation, it is an ancient nation. A nation whose language you do not know, you will not understand what they say.⁵⁹

(Jer 5:15)

The important element to highlight from these two verses is the way in which divine punishment is concretized by the fear of being placed in an unfamiliar linguistic situation. In the biblical context, it perhaps makes sense that the dreaded nation would be marked in such a way. Yahweh intends to exile the people far from their homes. They will be taken into a completely foreign territory; in this case foreignness is marked most clearly by language. From a hermeneutical perspective, however, the focus is more pronounced. The very inability to understand another's language is linked to divine punishment. Intra-lingual encounters—the necessity for translation—are grounded in the biblical experience of sin and punishment.

The connection between language difference and divine chastisement is marked in the opposite fashion by a number of other passages. In these texts, the removal or overcoming of linguistic diversity is associated with salvific events. Psalm 114:1 opens: “When Israel went forth from Egypt, the House of

⁵⁹ Interestingly, the prophet goes on to claim that “their quivers are like a yawning grave—they are all mighty men (גִּבּוֹרִים).” Here is the same term that showed up in relation to the Nephilim and Nimrod. The Jeremian oracle allows for a connection between this foreign nation (Babylon), frightful language difference, and גִּבּוֹרִים.

Jacob from a people of strange speech ...” (בֵּית יַעֲקֹב מֵעַם לִעֲזִי). The psalmist goes on to praise Yahweh for the deliverance of Israel at the Sea of Reeds. In this passage, the speech of the oppressors is marked by the word לִעֲזִי. The term is quite rare in the Hebrew Bible.⁶⁰ In other Semitic languages, it denotes the ability to speak a foreign language.⁶¹ More importantly, the deliverance of the Israelites is associated with their freedom from the linguistic realm of the Egyptians. It is clear that the mention of language in this context serves as a representative marker for that which is foreign. It is the choice of that marker which is essential, however. Hermeneutically speaking, salvation (as defined by the psalmist) is characterized by deliverance from the linguistic domination of the oppressor.

A similar situation pertains in Isa 33:18–20. In this oracle, the prophet speaks of a time when the people will behold a “king in his beauty.” Those present on that day will be in awe at the abundance and beauty of the land. Interestingly enough, for our purposes, the people will be impressed with the presence of towers. “Where is the one,” the prophet imagines the people proclaiming, “who could count all these towers” (Isa 33:18).⁶² The oracle continues with a reference to the purification of Zion from all foreign (polluting?) influences. Foreignness is once again marked, however, in one particular way: linguistically.

No more shall you see barbarian folk, the people of speech too obscure to comprehend, so stammering of tongue that they are not understood (אֲתֵּת־עַם בְּיָנָה לֹא תִרְאֶה עַם עִמְקֵי שִׁפְהָ מִשְׁמוּעַ נִלְעַג לִשׁוֹן אִין בִּינָה).

Putting aside for a moment the xenophobic attitude of the oracle (“why can’t they just speech Judean?”), the passage is hermeneutically quite important.⁶³ Once again, language difference is treated as a negative and unwanted

⁶⁰ The term is used only here and in Isa 33:19, to be discussed below.

⁶¹ Kohler/Baumgartner, “לִעֲזִי,” *HALOT* 1:533.

⁶² The reference to towers, to be exegetically fair, takes place in a particular historical and literary context. The larger context of the verse is: “Where is the one who could count? Where is the one who could weigh? Where is the one who could count all these towers?” Blenkinsopp views the passages against the background of an anticipated liberation from Assyrian oppression. He notes especially the Sennacharib affair of 701 BCE. He states that “what is therefore being described in this finale is the reversal of the situation at a critical juncture of Sennacharib’s campaign. Zion will be secure, as it certainly was not at that point; the Assyrians speaking their unintelligible language will be gone; tribute will no longer be exacted” (Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah* 1–39, 445). Counting towers would be an activity engaged in by a foreign oppressor in order to exact an appropriate tribute from the subjugated. Outside of a historical-critical reading of the passage, however, I simply wish to underscore the association of linguistic difference and towers as a potentially productive observation.

⁶³ There are two issue of interest here. First, it is curious to note that elsewhere in Isaiah

social reality. The origin of language difference, therefore, may be equally suspect. For a culture that imagines a day when all foreign speakers will be absent from the homeland, Babel can only be an unfortunate fall from a linguistic Eden.⁶⁴ The continuation of the oracle is equally important. Once all foreign speech is eradicated in the Holy City, absolute stability will reign. The ultimate—although misguided—dream of Babel will come to fruition.

When you gaze upon Zion, our city of assembly, Your eyes shall behold Jerusalem, as a secure homestead, a tent not to be transported, whose pegs shall never be pulled up, and whose ropes will never break. (Isa 33:20)

Babel has fallen, Zion never will.

Zephaniah 3:9–12 represents a development *beyond* the connection between overcoming of linguistic difference and *historical* salvation. The passage is widely considered to be eschatological; a prophetic insight into what the fate of the nations and of Israel will be “on that day.”⁶⁵ It is probably also

the problem is that the Assyrians are taunting the besieged inhabitants of Jerusalem in the language of Judea. On that occasion, Eliakim, Shebna and Joah plead with the emissary of the king of Assyria, the Rabshakeh: “Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, since we understand it; do not speak to us in Judean in the hearing of the people on the wall” (Isa 36:11). The Assyrians do not always speak in an unintelligible language, it seems. Mimicry and mockery with regard to foreign language is also present. Another passage in Isaiah (18:7) appears to mimic and mock the speech of the foreigner. The JPS translates “a nation of gibber and chatter” for the linguistically uncertain Hebrew phrase גוי קוֹרֵן וְנִבְּוֶה. Furthermore, Isa 28:10–13 uses the same language in a context where murmuring and confused speech appear the essential point. There may be a connection here to a practice known from numerous cultures where mimicking the language of the *Other* is a means of designating (and denigrating) the *Other*. Most famously, the ancient Greeks held that all non-Greeks were barbarians—those who said *bar, bar, bar* (apparently what non-Greek language sounded like to ancient Greek ears). Within ancient Greek culture, the mimicking-designation of other languages may ultimately point to an evaluation of the culture which speaks them. D. Gera looks at two phrases used of speakers of non-Greek in Homer (βαρβαροφωνως and αργισφωνως) and detects a negative valence. She claims that “these two words may point to an attitude found in later Greek writings, according to which non-Greek languages spoken by foreigners are thought to characterize their (inferior) culture. While the use of the word *barbaros* here may well be onomatopoeic, reflecting the babbling sound of foreign speech, *argios* is a negative or judgmental term, which refers to lifestyle as much as language” (Gera, *Ancient Greek Ideas*, 2).

⁶⁴ Modern debates around English-only laws in the United States are a useful, if anachronistic, analogy to the Isaiah-oracle.

⁶⁵ “On that day” or בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא is a common marker in much prophetic material of eschatological literature. An eschatological interpretation has not gone unchallenged, however. Marvin Sweeney is one contemporary critic who holds that the text may derive from the pre-exilic prophet Zephaniah and have an historical and political referent. Marvin Sweeney, *Zephaniah: A Commentary* (Hermenia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 183–185. Its status as an eschatological text is often tied closely to a conviction that it is a late (possibly post-

an explicit reference back to the narrative of Babel; a rare example of inner-biblical allusion/exegesis with regard to Gen 11.⁶⁶ Adele Berlin highlights the prophet's general relationship to the larger Primeval History when she claims that "themes from the early chapters of Genesis appear in all three chapters of Zephaniah."⁶⁷ The passage under our consideration—whether it is eschatological or not—speaks of a time when Yahweh will cause *all the people* to speak a "pure language" (שֹׁפָה בְּרוּרָה). The meaning of this phrase is debated.⁶⁸ It is not clear that the prophet is suggesting that all

exilic) addition to the book of Zephaniah. Sweeney points to the conviction of O. Steck that "the eschatological perspectives ... were added so that Zephaniah could be incorporated in the book of the Twelve" (182).

⁶⁶ Aron Pinker argues for a direct connection between the narrative of Gen 11 and the passage in Zephaniah through the use of *Leitenworte* or leading-words. Included in these leading words are: שֹׁפָה, בְּרוּרָה, בְּנֵה, הִבֵּה, שֹׁפָה, בְּלִי-אֶרֶץ, שֵׁם, and פֹּיֵן. Pinker states that, "leading words can be identified as an addition with a meaning, a message that has to be revealed ... the message is not delivered by the story per se but has to forge for itself an expression by means of single words or phrases and their association" (Aron Pinker, "The Book of Zephaniah: Allusions to the Tower of Babel," *JBQ* 28 [2000]: 3). Pinker's larger argument is concerned with demonstrating the connection between Zeph 3 and Gen 11 and speculating about the historical context and theological purposes for which such a connection was made. Ben Zvi is critical of connecting the two passages tightly. He states that "if there is any relation between the accounts, it can only be a very loose one, built around free association" (Ehud Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah* [BZAW 198; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991], 225, n. 736). Sweeney, in his recent commentary, is more open to reading Zeph 3 as an example of inner-biblical allusion—although he never makes use of the term in his discussion. He does claim, however, that "the dependence of Zeph 3:9–10 on this tradition (Tower of Babel) can hardly be taken as indication of its late date" (183). Sweeney does not seem to presume that the relationship between the two texts is loose or requires free association. At any rate, my own interest in Zephaniah is not historical, but hermeneutical. Pinker wants to know what Babel adds to the prophecy of Zephaniah, I wish to determine what the prophecy of Zephaniah adds to the interpretation of Babel.

⁶⁷ Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah: A New Translation with Introduction and Notes* (AB 25A; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 13.

⁶⁸ Berlin suggests that the reference to "pure" speech may point to a cultic background. Psalms 15:2–3 and 24:4 both "suggest that proper speech is a requirement for entrance into the cult" (Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 133). We might call this the cultic interpretation of the passage. In both of these psalms, however, the linguistic issue is one of either slander (15:2) or false oaths (24:4). It is the *content* of speech which makes it pure or impure. We might call this the ethical interpretation of the phrase. Ben Zvi seems to support such an interpretation. He rejects a reading which treats the phrase on analogy with Isa 6. "Consequently, the meaning of Zeph 3:9 cannot be derived from Isa 6:1–7, and the proposal that בְּרוּרָה means 'pure' in a cultic sense is to be rejected" (Ben Zvi, *Book of Zephaniah*, 225). Ben Zvi contrasts pure speech with false or deceitful speech. The testimony of the LXX adds another—hermeneutically significant—angle for interpretation. The translators rendered the Hebrew of Zeph 3:9 as follows: ὅτι τότε μεταστρέψω ἐπὶ λαοὺς γλῶσσαν εἰς γενεὰν αὐτῆς τοῦ ἐπικαλεῖσθαι πάντας τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου τοῦ δουλεύειν αὐτῷ ὑπὸ ζυγὸν ἓνα. The final phrase connecting the language with 'generation' points to a conviction that the image is one of reversal back to the primal

people will speak the same language, I grant. One could make a distinction between a “pure” language and a solitary language. The two may be closely linked, however. “Perhaps we should understand ‘pure speech’ as the opposite of ‘unintelligible speech’ which prevents communication,” argues Berlin.⁶⁹ Another modern expositor has recently suggested that the reference to speech itself is metaphorical: “the lips utter what is in the heart; heart and mouth may therefore occur as parallels or be mentioned in the same breath.”⁷⁰ Pure speech is simply another way to claim pure motives and right intention. At any rate, even if the prophet is not claiming that human speech itself will become *unitary*, he is asserting that somehow it will be transformed to make it an appropriate vessel for the worship of Yahweh.

The imposition of such a pure language will allow all people to call on the *name* of Yahweh and to serve him as *one* (אֶחָד).⁷¹ “To call on the name of Yahweh” brings to mind Gen 4:26 which marks the point in the Primeval History when “men began to call on the name of Yahweh.” Language may not be unitary, but certainly people united in the worship of Yahweh may be. The passage suggests that linguistic diversity is only limited to a certain moment in the history of Yahweh’s dealings with the nations. There will come a time, the prophet suggests, when all people will speak a pure language, which, furthermore, will permit the people to worship Yahweh “as one.” The purification (or re-unification?) of language, therefore, has one primary goal: the ability of humanity to worship Yahweh in an appropriate manner. The unity which the builders of Babel so desired is re-imagined here. The people will speak a pure language—all of them—which will allow them, not to make a name for themselves, but to call on the name of Yahweh.

The prophet continues, however, with a further vision of what life will be like following the purification of the speech of the nations. Peoples from beyond the rivers of Cush will bring offerings to Yahweh. Standing in parallelism with the reference to those from beyond the river Cush is עֲתָרֵי בֵּת־פּוֹצִי. There is some dispute over how best to render the phrase. Ben Zvi presents two options. The first reading treats the phrase as proper nouns and

language of humanity. The word בְּרִיָּה is here treated as deriving from the Hebrew word for create, בָּרָא. Sweeney states: “such a reading would apparently presuppose that the language of the nations is changed back to its singular form prior to the time of the Tower of Babel episode” (168).

⁶⁹ Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 133.

⁷⁰ Johannes Vlaardingebroek, *Zephaniah* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Leuven: Peeters, 1991), 196.

⁷¹ Literally, “with one shoulder” or “in one accord.” Ben Zvi, *Book of Zephaniah*, 226.

further examples of those peoples who will bring tribute to Jerusalem. Ben Zvi claims that, according to this line of interpretation, these are “names, or the supposed names, of two remote peoples ... mentioned in order to stress the point that even the most remote peoples will send their offerings to YHWH.”⁷² This interpretive tradition is supported by a number of medieval Jewish expositors (Ibn Ezra, Radak, Abrabanel). A second approach is to view the phrase as a reference to the dispersed people of Israel returning to Jerusalem. On this reading, פְּנִי is not a proper name, but means “my dispersed.” The phrase could therefore be translated as “my suppliants, the daughters of my dispersed.”⁷³ The hermeneutical perspective on the text, however, does not need to adjudicate between these two options. If the text is allowed to sound at its full inter-textual or inner-biblical level, the reference to “my dispersed” is easily read as a reference back to those whom Yahweh dispersed on the plain of Shinar. It was the fear of the people, after all, that they would be dispersed (פָּנִי-פָּנוּיָן). On this reading, Yahweh is reversing the actions taken at Babel.

The nations that were scattered at Babel will now turn in truth towards the God of Israel. Yahweh furthermore promises that your “proud and exultant ones” (עֲלִיזֵי גִּזְאוֹתֶיךָ)⁷⁴ will be removed from the midst of Israel and “you will be haughty no more on My Holy Mountain” (וְלֹא תוֹסֵפִי לְגִבְהָה עוֹד בְּהָר) (Zeph 3:11). The purification of language results not only in the ability for all nations (the whole earth) to worship Yahweh rightly, but it precedes a divine judgment and removal of all pride, exultation and haughtiness. Babel is eschatologically inverted. Berlin is correct when she states, “it is as if the story of Babel were being reversed and all people’s reunited in the worship of the LORD.”⁷⁵ The Jewish tradition has long recognized the usefulness of reading Genesis in light of Zephaniah as the prophetic passage (*haftarah*) listed for the Shabbat on which the account of Babel is read is precisely the material from Zephaniah.⁷⁶

⁷² Ben Zvi, *Zephaniah*, 227.

⁷³ For a short analysis of the legitimate translation options with regard to the phrase see, Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 135.

⁷⁴ To anticipate the discussion of biblical rhetoric concerning Babylon below, this phrase—עֲלִיזֵי גִּזְאוֹתֶיךָ—only occurs in Zeph 3 and in connection with Babylon in Isa 13:3 (Ben Zvi, *Book of Zephaniah*, 231–232 and Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 136).

⁷⁵ Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 14.

⁷⁶ Ben Zvi holds that the juxtaposition of these two texts allowed for the production of paratextual meaning. Paratextual is defined as “a meaning that evolved out of the reading of

4.3. *A Fountain of Life*

The rhetoric of speech in the Hebrew Bible deals not only with the problem of linguistic unfamiliarity and diversity. Another strand of thinking, most characteristic of the wisdom tradition, is concerned with questions of proper versus improper speech or with the power of language when yielded by the wicked and righteous respectively.⁷⁷ Proverbs 10:11 is representative of this line of proverbial thought: “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but lawlessness covers the mouth of the wicked.” It is not surprising that speech itself would be important to the sages. Murphy claims that “words are the coin of the wisdom realm.”⁷⁸ A concern with the distinction between proper and improper, wicked and righteous, is relevant because some early Jewish interpreters focus on the *nature of the speech* of the Babelites rather than the *actual language* they spoke. It is well-known that the book of Proverbs is particularly concerned with proper and improper speech. Because Proverbs focuses on key terms related to speech (such as פִּי, לִשׁוֹן, and שִׁפְהָה) a brief review of a pair of representative passages and how they might inform canonical thinking about the ‘sin of Babel’ is warranted. In order to place a limit on the number of proverbs discussed, however, I have restricted the discussion to those texts where one of the three Hebrew terms above is present *as well as* some substantial element from the narrative of Gen 11 (name, tower, etc.).⁷⁹ In addition, one proverb will be significant despite its lack of discussion about speech.

A passage especially *a propos* to the narrative of Babel is Prov 11:11. “A city is built up (lit. raised up) by the blessing of the upright/but it is torn down by the speech of the wicked” (בְּבִרְכַּת יְשָׁרִים תָּרוּם קִרְיָהּ וּבְפִי רָשָׁעִים תִּהְרָס). On its surface the proverb underscores that civic well-being is tied to the justness of a city’s inhabitants. The presence of the upright is experienced as beneficial for the larger social collection. In this proverb, however, the

these two different texts, one after the other, in one communal service as a liturgical unit” (Ben Zvi, *Book of Zephaniah*, 24–25, n. 21). More broadly, a connection between linguistic universalism and the *eschaton* has been discovered amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls. See E. Eshel and M.E. Stone, “The Holy Language at the End of the Days in Light of a New Fragment Found at Qumran,” *Tarbiz* 62 (1992/1993), 169–178 [Hebrew].

⁷⁷ For a discussion of the nature of proper and improper speech in wisdom texts, see W. Bühlmann, *Vom Rechten Reden und Schweigen* (OBO 12; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 1976).

⁷⁸ Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (3d. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 22.

⁷⁹ A number of proverbs deal with positive and negative aspects related to speech. These would include: 10:11; 10:19; 11:9; 12:6; 12:13; 12:14; 12:19; 13:2; 13:3; 14:3; 15:2; 15:4; 15:16; 16:27; 16:29; 17:13; 18:6–7; 18:21.

activity of city-building and speech intersect in a hermeneutically poignant manner. The well-being of civic life and its institutions is shown to depend on the very words spoken by righteous or evil peoples. While the proverb is certainly speaking metaphorically, the literal level does not disappear. Words themselves matter. The city is either in the process of being raised up (תָּרוּם קֶרֶת) or torn down (תִּהְרָס). The text of Gen 11 informs us that the city built on the plain of Shinar was an abortive civic experiment; the logic of the proverb is unavoidable. It is possible to argue that, because the city and tower were not completed in Gen 11, the Babelites must have been engaged in improper speech—they represent the speech of the wicked. The destruction of Babel and its tower is nothing other than an *historical actualization* of the proverb.

While there is no mention of speech (good, bad or otherwise), no other proverb intersects with and potentially informs the account of Babel more than Prov 18:10. “The name of the LORD is a tower of strength/ To which the righteous man runs and is safe” (מִגְדַּל־עֹז שֵׁם יי בּוֹ יִרְוֶן צַדִּיק וְנִשְׁגָּב). The juxtaposition of name/tower in this proverb is exegetically productive. One key element of the Babel narrative was the people’s desire to make a name for themselves. This desire, as we have seen, has been widely denounced as rank hubris. The above proverb encapsulates in a pithy aphorism an apt condemnation of the generation of the dispersion. By means of a tower the Babelites sought to create a name when, in fact, it was the very name of Yahweh which would have served as a strong tower. The ‘sin’ of Babel is not simply the attempt to seize a divine prerogative—the ability to make a name—but idolatry itself.⁸⁰ Reading Gen 11 in juxtaposition with Prov 18:10, the people’s search for a name appears as the functional equivalent of rejecting Yahweh. The proverb contains even more significance for the exegetical imagination, however. If Prov 18:10 is read as an aphoristic synopsis of the account of Babel, there is an additional plot element which can be added. Who is the righteous man who runs to Yahweh? From what is he being saved?

⁸⁰ Murphy has suggested that Prov 18:10 is a sort of exegetical key for interpreting a cluster of proverbs in 18:10–12. In the case of the vast majority of proverbs “no specific context is provided. However, in some cases there is a clear relativizing of a saying by means of juxtaposition. The meaning of 18:11 (riches are the strength of a person) is relativized by the saying in 18:10 that the name of the Lord is a strong tower. This impression is strengthened when one examines 18:12 (pride goes before the fall). Many sayings throughout the book (of Proverbs) are in a certain tension with one another, but rarely in such a striking context as this” (Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 19).

5. *Babylon in the Hebrew Bible*

It should not be forgotten that the account of the Tower of Babel concludes with an etiology which seeks to explain the origin of linguistic diversity through a pun on the name of Babylon. Babylon, the mighty city and nemesis of Judah, is confusion itself.

Z. Weisman is inclined to see the tower narrative as an example of political satire.

[The] historical and political lesson of the rise of Babylon to world power is reflected satirically in the story of the Tower of Babel. It is Babylon, with its desire to center the unification of the entire world on itself, which was the very power that exiled peoples from their lands and scattered them across the face of the earth.⁸¹

For Weisman, the narrative of the tower makes the most sense in a context of fear and loathing of the Babylonian empire: the story is one which could only have arisen during the exilic period. Rhetoric about Babylon, however, is present throughout the Hebrew Bible and would have been available to early Jewish interpreters in their readings and re-readings of the account in Genesis.⁸²

In this final section I examine a number of passages in the Hebrew Bible in order to determine how the characterization of Babylon—the rhetorical construct of Babylon, not the *historical* Babylon (although the two are undeniably linked)—might redound upon Gen 11 and how it might reverberate in the ears of later Jewish interpreters of the tower. Christopher Begg, in a short study on the image of Babylon and the redactional history of the book of Isaiah, uses the term *Babelbild* in this regard.⁸³ This designation encapsulates nicely what I am examining in the last portion of this chapter. Both Isaiah (13–14) and Jeremiah (50–52) have something to say about Babylon. The nature of their characterization of Babylon often ties in directly with the language used of the tower itself and with later interpretations of the tower.

⁸¹ Ze'ev Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible* (Semeia Series 32; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 48.

⁸² The continual rhetorical usefulness of 'Babylon' is demonstrated abundantly by the New Testament book of Revelation. There it is the 'whore of Babylon' who is emblematic of another world-power, the Roman Empire (Rev. 17–18).

⁸³ Christopher T. Begg, "Babylon in the Book of Isaiah," in *The Book of Isaiah/Le Livre D'Isaïe: Les Oracles et leurs relectrues unite de l'ouvrage* (ed. Jacques Vermeylen; BETL 81; Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1989), 122; see also John Hill, *Friend or Foe?: Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah MT* (BiblInt 40; Leiden: Brill, 1999).

The first passage of some interest is Isa 14:3–21.⁸⁴ The poem is a taunt-song (הַמְשָׁל) over the king of Babylon and includes a narration of the fall of the enigmatic *Helel ben Shahaḥ*. Later Christian tradition would identify this figure with Satan himself and read the passage as thinly veiled commentary on a primal insurgency and the expulsion of a group of rebellious divine figures.⁸⁵ The exceptionally long and broad history of interpretation of this passage is outside our present scope. For our purposes, there are a number of *key themes highlighted* in this poem which add theological texture and provide interpretive ammunition for later Jewish readers. The Isaianic characterization of the “king of Babylon” provides for a deep portrait and characterization of the essential nature of Babylon—past, present and future. Two elements are especially important: the characterization of Babylon as a place of oppression and the primal sin of the “king of Babylon.”

The passage begins by sounding a joyful note over the destruction of the king of Babylon. His death is to be a source of exultation because of the previous misery over which he reigned. “How is the taskmaster vanished, how is oppression ended” (אֵיךְ שָׁבַת נֶגֶשׁ שְׁבַתָּה מִדְּהָבָה) (Isa 14:14). Babylon, we are led to believe, is a source of unending oppression and, like Egypt, a place of hard-labor.⁸⁶ The root נֶגֶשׁ (taskmaster) is used to describe the oppression suffered by the Israelites while in Egypt (Exod 5:6) and with reference to those who forced them to work (Exod 3:7; 5:10, 13). Babylon is just like Egypt. We have encountered this comparison before. The hermeneutical importance of this correlation is far from minor. Later interpreters will question the primeval unity attributed to the builders of Babel by the biblical text. A less peaceable reading of Gen 11 might conceivably have some roots in the characterization of Babylon contained in the present Isaianic oracle. Bablyon is the equal of Egypt when it comes to oppression.

⁸⁴ The secondary literature with regard to this short poem is immense! For a good overview of the history of interpretation, see R. Mark Shipp, *Of Dead Kings and Dirges: Myth and Meaning in Isaiah 14:4b–21* (SBLAcBib 11; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 1–27.

⁸⁵ This figure is infamously equated with *Lucifer* in the Vulgate translation of the book of Isaiah. Critical scholarship traces the reference back to ancient observations of the night-sky. Blenkinsopp is representative of the standard approach. He claims the account may “derive from a Phoenician-Canaanite source inspired by the rise of Venus the morning star and its rapid disappearance at sunrise. The Hebrew name for the ‘Star of the Dawning Day,’ *Helel ben shahaḥ*, corresponds to two known deities from Ras Shamra texts” (Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah* 1–39, 288).

⁸⁶ The second term of the pair, מִדְּהָבָה, occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible. The most common suggestion—in light of meaning and ancient textual evidence—is that the dalet is a scribal error and that the original reading would have been מִדְּהָבָה. If correct, the term would derive from דָּהַב which also means to act oppressively. L. Kohler and W. Baumgartner, “דָּהַב,” *HALOT* 2:1192.

The poem shifts to a post-mortem reception for the “Shining One, son of Dawn/Helel ben Shahar” as he descends into the Israelite underworld, Sheol, and takes up his place among those rulers who went before him. He is castigated:

You said in your heart—I will go up into the heavens (הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲעֲלֶה), I will set up my throne even higher than the stars of God. I will dwell on the mount of assembly, at the peak of Zaphon. (Isa 14:13)

The king of Babylon is credited with making the most audacious of claims—he will be like God himself. He will dwell in the sacred realm. Such preposterous claims are countered with a narration of his descent into the underworld—as far from the summit of Zaphon as is possible. It takes no great exegetical imagination to make the connection between this king of Babylon and speculation concerning the original sin of Babel—both represent a desire to move into the heavenly realms and a persistent tendency to equate oneself with the divine. But the poetry of Isaiah takes the imagery farther than the suggestive language of Gen 11. Read in canonical context, the tower account seems to narrate not only another example of Babylon's tendency towards self-divinization, *but the primal event itself*.⁸⁷

Jeremiah is no more generous in his discussion of Babylon. The core of the message of the historical Jeremiah was quasi-positive with regard to Babylon. The kingdom, like others before it, was seen as an instrument sent to chastise the people of Yahweh. In a famous passage, the prophet claims divine approval of Babylonian hegemony.

Thus said the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel, say this to your masters:

It is I who made the earth, and the men and the beasts who are on the earth, by my great might and my outstretched arm; and I give it to whomever I deem proper. I herewith deliver all these lands to my servant, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon; I even give him the wild beasts to serve him. All nations shall serve him. (Jer 27:4–5)

Obedience to Yahweh is equated with subjugation to the yoke of Babylon. Like Assyria before her, however, Babylon and its rulers fail to recognize the true source of their power. They are oblivious to their own instrumentality. They overreach and call down upon themselves the judgment of the deity.

⁸⁷ The time-less feel of the poem itself permitted its reapplication throughout the history of its interpretation. Isaiah 14 could be read as not only providing commentary on the nature of Babylon as such, but as detailing even more information with regard to the primal event of Babylon itself.

The entirety of Jeremiah 50–51 has much in common with the other oracles against the nations in the prophetic corpus. In this lengthy passage, the prophet glories and exults over the destruction and utter annihilation of Babylon for overreaching, for destroying the very temple of Yahweh. The prophetic voice demands: “raise a shout against her, all about! She has surrendered, her bastions have fallen, her walls are thrown down—this is Yahweh’s vengeance” (Jer 50:15a). The punishment of Yahweh here is portrayed as tumbling walls and crumbling fortifications. Yahweh destroys the pretense to power that is Babylon.

The extensive and vitriolic rhetoric of Jeremiah 50–51, exquisitely detailing the nature of the coming destruction of Babylon at the hands of others, is clearly too broad to survey here. There are a number of passages, however, which possess some potential connection to the narrative of the tower. In each case, a historical-critical reading of the text points to the destruction of Babylon at the close of the exilic period. From a canonical perspective, however, these passages can just as easily be read as veiled commentary on the primal sin of Babylon itself. The jeremiads launched at the moribund empire and arch-enemy of Judah can be hermeneutically de-contextualized and utilized to provide a national characterization of Babylon. Jeremiah 51:7–9 provides an interesting inter-text for reading the tower narrative. Babylon is portrayed as a “golden cup in the hand of Yahweh, making drunk the entire earth (כָּל-הָאָרֶץ). From her wine the nations drank and they went insane.” All the earth, in the language of Gen 11, was somehow implicated in the sin of Babylon. The language of intoxication furthers the image of a humanity out-of-control and under the sway of the unwise counsel of Babylon. This is an apt description of how some later interpreters will view the reference to “all the earth” speaking in one language at the beginning of Gen 11.

Immediately following this passage, in Jer 51:9b, Babylon’s fall is described and the prophetic voice conveys that the “judgment of Babylon reaches to the heavens, is lifted up to the clouds” (בִּיָּגַע אֶל-הַשָּׁמַיִם מִשְׁפָּטָהּ וְנִשָּׂא) (עַד-שָׁמַיִם). There is some confusion here. The Hebrew text claims that it is the ‘judgment’ of Babylon, her מִשְׁפָּט, that extends to heaven. Lundbom notes the interpretive difficulty when he states,

the problematic term here is *mispatah* (lit. ‘her judgment, justice’); we expect something more like ‘her evil’ ... since one imagines that it is Babylon’s evil being adjudicated.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 37–52: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 21C; New York: Doubleday, 2004), 442.

Lundbom concludes that the phrase is meant to point to the enormity of the punishment which Yahweh is bringing against Babylon. Lundbom argues that “to the heavens” is a metaphor underscoring the extensive nature of the punishment. We may still wonder—why *that metaphor*. Why the consistent association of Babylon with the heavens?

Jeremiah 51:53 provides another text rich in meanings. First to the text in its original historical context: the prophet re-assures those Judeans living in exile that Babylon can not escape destruction, no matter how hard she might try. The vengeance of God is coming. Such is the straight-forward meaning of the passage. But, in close association, we find two terms of importance from the tower narrative: heavens (שָׁמַיִם) and impossibility/inaccessibility (בְּצָר).⁸⁹ The text reads:

If Babylon should climb to the sky (כִּי־תַעֲלֶה בָּבֶל הַשָּׁמַיִם), and if she should make inaccessible (תִּבְצָר) her fortified height, from me devastators shall come to her—oracle of Yahweh.⁹⁰

In its present context, the passage is clearly speaking of an event of current and contemporary importance—the approaching destruction of Babylon, notwithstanding any attempt on her part to escape. In the canonical context, both the imagery and the lexical connection to Gen 11 allow the oracle to be not only a prophecy of the future but an explicit comment on God’s past relationship with Babylon. The oracle of Yahweh, from an exegetical perspective, *can interpret both the future and the past simultaneously*. The reference to the ‘devastators’ from Yahweh—seemingly a term used to describe the various nations taking up arms against Babylon—could also be seen as reference to those ‘others’ present in Gen 11:6 when Yahweh says “let us descend.”

It is not correct to refer to these passages from Jeremiah as examples of either inner-biblical exegesis or inner-biblical allusion. The oracles certainly have their own inherent meaning. I would not want to argue they were meant to point or relate in any significant way to the narrative of Babel. Weismann has even suggested that it is highly unlikely that the historical Jeremiah (if he is the author of these two passages) was familiar with the narrative of the tower as we know it in Gen 11. What I am arguing is something

⁸⁹ This later term is used in Gen 11 with reference to what the people will be able to accomplish if their building program is not halted. Nothing will be withheld from the Babelites. In Jeremiah, the Babylonians attempt to make their fortifications inaccessible, but Yahweh is clearly able to overcome their defensive moves.

⁹⁰ I am using here the translation Lundbom, *Jeremiah* 37–52, 490.

more subtle. These two passages from Jeremiah add to a larger character profile of Babylon in the Hebrew Bible. This negative portrayal of all things Babylonian would have made it virtually impossible for any early Jewish interpreter to read an account of the Tower of Babel without certain pre-suppositions.

6. Conclusions

I stated at the beginning of this chapter that my attempt here is to provide examples of inter-texts which clarify and place into a larger canonical context the reading strategies adopted by later Jewish interpreters. The seemingly simple and straightforward narrative of the Tower of Babel is quickly made more complex by more robust and informed canonical knowledge. Simple concepts such as *speech*, *city* and *tower* possess myriad and competing connotations. Even the most mundane elements of Gen 11, *bricks and mortar*, look differently through the canonical filter. Reading Babel a second (or third, or sixteenth) time produces a very different narrative. The very diversity born on the plain of Shinar has become a central element of the reality of reading Babel itself.

In what follows in Parts II and III some of the texts discussed here will be encountered again. Others—even the majority—will not. I would hasten to claim that I do not see this as a problem for my argument in any way. Not every interpretive move is grounded in an explicit citation of another biblical text. All interpretive moves, however, are taken with knowledge of other texts. The goal of this chapter finally was to raise an exegetical awareness of the *potential ways* in which the short narrative of Gen 11:1–9 might intersect with other passages from the Hebrew Bible. I have not been comprehensive. That would have been too Babelian an endeavor on my part. I turn now to the history of Babel in early Jewish exegesis.

PART II

REWRITTEN BABEL

INTRODUCTION TO PART II

Translators, to lay the old adage to rest once and for all, have to be traitors, but most of the time they don't know it, and nearly all of the time they have no other choice, not as long as they remain within the boundaries of the culture that is theirs by birth or adoption—not, therefore, as long as they try to influence the evolution of the culture, which is an extremely logical thing for them to want to do.¹

The fact that certain Jews during the Second Temple period produced works which retold portions of the Hebrew Bible as a means of interpretation is a phenomenon peculiar to the literary history of Judaism. These works, although quite diverse in form and content, are often treated together as exemplars of the so-called genre of rewritten Bible.² Both elements of this

¹ André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Routledge, 1992), 13.

² Geza Vermes is often credited with coining the phrase rewritten Bible in his *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (2d. ed.; StPB 4; Leiden: Brill, 1973). All subsequent discussion of questions related to rewritten Bible has treated Vermes as the touchstone. Bruce Fisk, however, has pointed to an earlier discussion by A. Spiro where the author speaks of “rewriting biblical history” with regard to the canonical book of Chronicles, as well as Sirach and the non-canonical Eupolemus and Pseudo-Philo. Bruce N. Fisk, *Do You Not Remember: Scripture, Story and Exegesis in the rewritten Bible of Pseudo-Philo* (JSPSup 37; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 13, n. 1. For discussions of the concept of rewritten Bible, see G.W.E. Nickelsburg, “The Bible Rewritten and Expanded,” in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus* (ed. Michael E. Stone; Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 1984), 89–156; Daniel Harrington, “Palestinian Adaptations of Biblical Narratives and Prophecies,” in *Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters* (ed. R.A. Kraft and G.W.E. Nickelsburg; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 239–247; Philip S. Alexander, “Retelling the Old Testament,” in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture* (ed. D.A. Carson and H.G.M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 99–120; Devorah Dimant, “Use and Interpretation of Mikra in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. M.J. Mulder; Compendium Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 1:2; Assen: Van Gorcum and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 379–419. Works almost universally agreed to be examples of rewritten Bible would include the book of *Jubilees* and the *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo. The discovery of manuscripts at Qumran

phrase are problematic. There is an implicit canonical claim being made here. The very term *Bible*, at least to contemporary ears, assumes a stable and firm division between holy and profane writings, a distinction which may not have obtained during the period when some of these works were composed. Steven Fraade has recently demurred that:

while the term 'rewritten Bible' might presume the status of a fixed, canonical Scripture prior to its 'rewriting', such a presumption may be a retrojection from the Bible's subsequent acquisition of closed, canonical authority.³

Given that proviso, it is fairly clear that at least the Pentateuch had attained canonical authority by the time rewritten Bible texts began to be produced sometime in the second century BCE.⁴ Some level of authority must be assumed to explain the very existence of texts which seek to rewrite as one does not waste time rewriting unimportant or non-authoritative literature.

If the term *Bible* is potentially misleading, the word *rewritten* is no less problematic. What does it mean to rewrite a narrative or a law-code? We cannot mean by this term merely the re-inscription of a text. That would be a simple scribal act. It is generally not that material which copies or repeats the biblical source itself which is of greatest interest to modern readers and interpreters of these works. It is, rather, the differences between the biblical version and the rewritten version. Difference of one sort or another—major or minor—is always an object of critical study with regard to these texts. But then it is not what is *re-written* that is of interest, but rather what *else* is written: what is written *instead* of or *in place of* or *in addition to* the original. It is for this reason that I would suggest that rewritten Bible texts do not rewrite so much as they *overwrite* the original. To use a scribal metaphor: the original, canonical version of the biblical material serves almost as a

has swelled the ranks of potential texts which might also be classified as rewritten Bible (as well as increasing the debate about the appropriate parameters for the use of the term). Most scholars would hold that texts such as the *Genesis Apocryphon* or the *Temple Scroll* are included in any reckoning of rewritten biblical texts. For a discussion of rewritten Bible as it pertains to Qumran literature, see George J. Brooke, "Rewritten Bible," in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. L.H. Schiffman and J.C. VanderKam; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 777–781.

³ Steven D. Fraade, "Rabbinic *Midrash* and Ancient Jewish Biblical Interpretation," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 106.

⁴ The prologue to Ben Sira is usually listed as the earliest evidence (c. 180 BCE) for the canonicity of the Torah and Prophets. The first exemplar of rewritten Bible probably belongs to the first work we will explore below, *Jubilees*. It is possible, however, to consider the Chronicler himself as the first author of a rewritten Bible.

palimpsest—a trace of an older document sometimes quite visible, at other times almost completely obscured—behind the new narrative creation.⁵

The phenomenon of the rewritten Bible raises important critical issues. Those scholars who have dealt with the texts have approached the literature with a number of questions. Among the most important are:

1. Does rewritten Bible constitute a specific genre and, if so, what distinguishes rewritten Bible from other forms of Jewish interpretive practice during the Second Temple period?
2. Is it possible to utilize rewritten Bible texts as evidence of larger (oral?) interpretive traditions in ancient Judaism? Previous scholarship has often dwelt on the presence of exegetical traditions in rewritten Bible texts which are also known from later (usually rabbinic) texts. We will return to this question in detail below.
3. How does one describe the relationship between the author(s) of these texts and the biblical text? Did those responsible for producing texts such as *Jubilees* or *Biblical Antiquities* believe they were explaining the biblical text, modifying the biblical text or even replacing the biblical text?

To proceed in reverse order by dealing with the last and most difficult question first: How did composers of rewritten Bible texts view their production in relation to what would become the canonical version? What level of authority did these works carry? Philip Alexander, in his discussion of rewritten Bible, grants these works limited authority, secondary to the canonical text. He isolates rewritten Bible texts by focusing on their “formal literary characteristics.”⁶ By exploring a number of texts which are almost universally agreed to be representatives of this genre, Alexander posits nine common characteristics. Rewritten Bible texts are narratives which “on the face of it (are) free-standing compositions.”⁷ They are not “intended to replace, or to supersede the Bible” but do “cover a substantial

⁵ The metaphor cannot be stretched too far, however. Rewritten Bible also utilizes re-contextualization of prior biblical material as an interpretive approach, making the palimpsest-metaphor less useful. The exact words of the authoritative text are sometimes retained, but set in a different literary or theological context. For an example of this approach *within* biblical literature itself, see Bernard M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁶ Alexander confines his study to the *Genesis Apocryphon*, the book of *Jubilees*, Josephus' *Judean Antiquities* and the *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo.

⁷ Alexander, “Retelling the Old Testament,” 116.

portion of the Bible” and are marked by interpretive expansions which “take as their starting point a single episode from the Bible ... and expand it beyond recognition.”⁸ While these rewritten versions “follow the Bible serially ... they are highly selective in what they present.” The purpose served by such rewriting, furthermore, is to “produce an interpretive reading of Scripture” and they “carry on an intense, if silent, dialectic with the original.” There are also some limitations to the rewritten Bible. These belated versions “can impose only a single interpretation on the original” and often are hindered in making their exegetical intent clear by their narrative structure. Lastly, rewritten Bible privileges Scripture as foundational, but supplements the biblical text with non-biblical (oral?) traditions. Alexander concludes that:

by fusing this (traditional) material with the biblical narrative the rewritten Bible texts appear to be aiming at a synthesis of the whole tradition (both biblical and non-biblical) within a biblical framework: they seek to unify the tradition on a biblical base.⁹

Alexander believes that the authors of rewritten Bible texts had a high regard for the biblical base text and were seeking to interpret that text rather than replace it. It is, in fact, almost a matter of scholarly commonplace to claim that the authors of rewritten Bible texts were not seeking to replace the biblical text: only to offer interpretation or clarification. Alexander’s position is re-articulated in a recent discussion by Michael Segal.

Even though these rewritten compositions sometimes contain material contradictory to their biblical sources, their inclusion within the existing framework of the biblical text bestows upon them legitimacy in the eyes of the intended audience. Indeed, the rewritten composition was not composed with the purpose of *replacing* the biblical texts, for without the Bible itself the rewritten composition loses its legitimacy.¹⁰

This seems to be impeccable logic, but I believe it to be flawed. I argue that the authors of those works discussed in the following section did indeed intend for their works to ‘replace’ the biblical text—at least among a certain readership. Rather than focusing on the authors and their intentions (something ultimately beyond our ability to determine), focus should be placed on the texts and their potential impact. We must look at both the

⁸ Ibid., 117.

⁹ Ibid., 118.

¹⁰ Michael Segal, “Between Bible and Rewritten Bible,” in *Biblical Interpretation at Qumran* (ed. Matthias Henze; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 11.

rhetorical and *functional* level of a given exemplar of rewritten Bible. Many examples of rewritten Bible texts certainly *do not claim* that they are seeking to replace or supersede the biblical base (although the introduction to the book of *Jubilees* certainly makes a bold claim). There is a difference, however, between what a text claims to be doing and what a text actually may accomplish in a given reading community. Regardless of what rewritten Bible texts claim rhetorically, at the *functional* level they had the power to shape a perception of the biblical material which could rival the original version. The narrative of Babel comes to mean, in such a context, not what the canonical text says it means, but what later interpreters claim it means. As the narrative is transformed it is *translated* to respond to new cultural and religious questions. Any subsequent reading of the canonical version will now be colored and shaped by knowledge of the rewritten version. Authors of rewritten Bible texts may or may not have *intended* their works to replace the canonical version, but they (almost) certainly did intend for their understanding of the canonical version to become normative for the communities to and for whom they wrote.¹¹

The second question posed above deals with the presence in rewritten Bible texts of interpretive traditions known from other Jewish texts, Second Temple and rabbinic. There has been a tendency in some scholarship to engage in what can be termed *exegetical excavation*. Rewritten Bible texts are treated as exegetical time-capsules which hold early formulations of ancient Jewish biblical exegesis. This is undoubtedly true; but the almost exclusive focus on exegetical excavation can easily lead to a disregard for the individual works of rewritten Bible themselves. The specific work is treated as secondary and accidental, a text to be sifted in order to uncover the earliest Jewish ruminations on the meaning of a specific verse or narrative of Scripture.¹² Fraade, in contrast, claims that:

[interpretive] traditions are never communicated or engaged by their tradents apart from their ideologically freighted and socially formative rhetorical embodiments. The medium may not alone be the message, but it certainly contributes mightily to it.¹³

¹¹ Alexander seems to be pointing towards such an understanding when he claims that the authors of such works aimed at a "synthesis" of the entire tradition, but I do not believe he emphasizes this point sufficiently.

¹² An example of this tendency from a previous generation is the brilliant multivolume work of Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*. Ginzberg's work is a catalogue of ancient Jewish interpretations of biblical material, culled from a wide array of Second Temple and rabbinic sources.

¹³ Fraade, "Rabbinic *Midrash* and Ancient Jewish Interpretation," 107.

My approach here is born both of respect for and some frustration with the work of James L. Kugel. The basic focus of Kugel's scholarly works is on what he terms isolated "exegetical motifs" in ancient Jewish literature. In his most recent work, Kugel gives the following definition: "an explanation of the meaning of a biblical verse, especially a potentially problematic one, or even a phrase or word within that verse."¹⁴ To use a scientific metaphor, Kugel is in search of the *exegetical-DNA* responsible for the production of works of biblical interpretation in ancient Judaism. This focus on individual verses, or even words, is central to his argument. He claims elsewhere: "ancient biblical interpretation is an interpretation of verses, not stories."¹⁵ His goal is to demonstrate that departures from the plain meaning of Scripture are not, as they may appear at first glance, flights of poetic fancy, but rather, deeply held communal acts¹⁶ of creative exegesis. He states that:

there is a tendency in readers ... to regard them as mere 'poetic flights', or as expressions of some political/theological program that came to be associated, more or less at random, with one part or another of the biblical text, or again, as left-over bits of popular folklore that eventually became fused with this or that biblical figure or incident.¹⁷

In addition, Kugel will often trace an exegetical motif's genealogy back to its point of origin and explain its development across various textual bodies in ancient Judaism, from its supposed initial appearance in one text to its transformation and elaboration in later ones.

¹⁴ James L. Kugel, *The Ladder of Jacob: Ancient Interpretations of the Biblical Story of Jacob and His Children* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 5.

¹⁵ James L. Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 28. See also the expanded version of this work, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); see also, Kugel, *The Ladder of Jacob*, 4.

¹⁶ Kugel seems to presuppose a communal setting for the production of exegetical motifs when he says: "it is certainly not hard to imagine young pupils in olden times asking their teacher just such things about Jacob's dream, or listeners to a sermon on this text quizzing the preacher about such matters once he was done. Bit by bit, and often in highly creative fashion, ancient interpreters managed to come up with answers" (Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 10). A discussion of the sociological assumptions behind such a statement is beyond the limits of this work. I would emphasize, however, that biblical interpretation *at its origins* is, for Kugel, a communal act in the context of a studying community. I have no squabble with such an approach. Reading the material from this perspective, however, does lead to greater abstraction of the interpretive process and a corresponding diminishment of interest in the production of concrete texts with all their attendant ideological and theological concerns.

¹⁷ Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Lives of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 247–248. The quote above is drawn from the first of nine theses which Kugel offers for readers of ancient Jewish biblical interpretation. It is foundation, therefore, to his approach.

Kugel has been very successful in explaining the origin and development of interpretive traditions. Such success, however, has come at a price. Kugel's approach treats exegetical motifs as disembodied ideas that travel independently of actual texts. These ideas are simply available to various authors in antiquity in their rewriting of the biblical text. That some exegetical answers to problematic aspects of the biblical narrative traveled in this fashion is undeniable. An exclusive focus on exegetical motifs, however, can blind the interpreter to the unique fashion in which these ideas are deployed to transform a narrative *as a whole* and the equally interesting act of integration of a narrative into the larger goals of various works during the Second Temple period.¹⁸

Fraade has recently made the same point by comparing Kugel's approach with that of Louis Ginzberg, the prolific scholar of the monumental work on Jewish biblical interpretation of the previous generation—the multivolume *Legends of the Jews*. Fraade states that, while Kugel's approach is an advance with regard to understanding the exegetical rationale for interpretive traditions:

his treatment of our subject is similar to Ginzberg's in his emphasis on a common tradition across time and context and his ahistorical blending of sources in disregard to their formal and rhetorical particularities.¹⁹

In other words, Kugel's approach fails to take the translational activity of individual works with the seriousness they deserve. Kugel seems to understand this limitation when he posits the "narrative expansion." He admits that:

an exegetical motif is by its nature abstract: it is an idea, a way of explaining a verse. A narrative expansion is always specific, the particular words of a particular text in which an exegetical motif is embodied.²⁰

Theoretically, this is all well and good, but Kugel's own analysis always seems to follow the abstract motif and very seldom the concrete embodiment. There are even occasions when he explicitly questions the importance of the

¹⁸ The abstraction inherent in Kugel's approach is most clearly seen in a consistent practice in his works to isolate and name exegetical motifs. With regard to Babel, for instance, he offers the following exegetical motifs: "They Tried to Storm Heaven," "A War Against God," "Nimrod Built It," "The Builders Were Giants," "The Tower Lies in Ruins" (Kugel, *The Bible as It Was*, 123–130). This naming can give the impression that a single exegetical motif serves the same narrative or theological function independently of its various literary instantiations.

¹⁹ Fraade, "Rabbinic *Midrash* and Ancient Jewish Biblical Interpretation," 120, n. 22.

²⁰ Kugel, *The Ladder of Jacob*, 6.

larger context of a specific interpretation of a biblical narrative. Re-iterating his verse-centered approach, he claims that:

even when interpreters had their eyes on the larger context, they always framed the question they sought to answer in terms of a specific verse, or more typically, one or two words prominent in that verse.²¹

Kugel is simply wrong in this regard and much interpretive activity is missed when there is an exclusive focus on exegetical motifs without a corresponding analysis of their usage in particular interpretive texts.

The concern of Part II is to treat each example of rewritten Bible discussed as a work unto itself, a work with its own aims and goals, its own theology, and its own distinct ways of reading and appropriating Scripture. We will see that the same interpretive tradition may function in very different ways depending on the larger narrative context in which it occurs. Interpretive traditions and “socially formative rhetorical embodiments” must be held in tension. Both *Medium* and *Message* are significant elements in the act of translating the tower.

The first question above may be addressed briefly here because the following chapters, each in their own way, will implicitly demonstrate that rewritten Bible is in no way a genre designation. Rewritten Bible texts take a number of different generic forms. Some of these forms are quite biblical while others draw heavily on non-Jewish genres of ancient writing. Brooke is quite blunt:

Rewritten Biblical texts come in almost as many genres as can be found in the biblical books themselves. Rewritten Bible is a label that is suitable for more than just narrative retellings of the biblical stories. It is a general umbrella term designating the particular kind of intertextual activity that always gives priority to one text over another.²²

More recent scholarship has questioned the wisdom of collecting all examples of rewritten Bible together under a genre-label.²³ For many, rewritten Bible is more descriptive of an attitude towards the canon; it is not a genre

²¹ Ibid., 4.

²² George J. Brooke, “Rewritten Bible,” 781.

²³ M. Bernstein, “‘Rewritten Bible’: A Generic Category that has Outlived its Usefulness?” *Textus* 22 (2005): 169–196. After reviewing a number of different scholars and their usages of the term, Bernstein concluded with a defense of the term and a plea for greater clarity in its use. “In short, I do not believe that the term in Vermes’ sense has outlived its usefulness, but rather that it still furnishes a valuable classificatory device, provided that we employ it in a disciplined fashion” (Bernstein, “Rewritten Bible,” 195).

in its own right. Bernstein in fact suggests that scholars should “distinguish between the ‘process of rewriting the Bible’ and the genre ‘rewritten Bible.’”²⁴

Because I am concerned more with the process of rewriting as a means of cultural translation, my own use of the term rewritten Bible is more expansive than traditional, genre-based, definitions would allow. No defense is needed for the inclusion of works such as *Jubilees* or *The Biblical Antiquities* in connection with the term rewritten Bible as they represent definitions of the term centered on process and product. It is also common to treat a portion of the *Judean Antiquities* of Josephus as an example of rewritten Bible.²⁵ Philo of Alexandria is more controversial. And virtually no one would include the *Third Sibylline Oracle* or 3 (*Greek*) *Baruch* as examples of rewritten Bible as that term is broadly used. They are included here, however, because I believe that (functionally) they recast the narrative of Babel just as certainly as does the *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo. They, too, make a claim that the true importance of Babel should be viewed in light of their interpretation.

In what follows in this section, I have adopted a tripartite approach to the material. Each work will receive a brief *hermeneutical sketch* which outlines the basic approach of the work or author to the Hebrew Bible. Such a broad view will allow for a more focused understanding of how the account of Babel is translated in each instance. A second section will explore the precise changes or differences between the rewritten and canonical versions of Babel. In this regard, I will offer some suggestions as to how the exegetical moves are justified and where certain interpretive ideas may have arisen—either from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible or from the larger cultural context of the retelling. In essence, I will be exploring how the gaps noted in Part I are filled within particular rewritings of the tower narrative. A final section will examine the rewritten version as an honest attempt at *translation* of the tower. This is an attempt to move beyond what I see as a focus on exegetical excavation. What were the over-arching goals in each re-narration of the event? What new vision or truth was the author attempting to communicate by means of the tower narrative? What pressing issues in the on-going life of ancient Judaisms did the work see present in the account of Babel?

The account of Babel makes an appearance in a number of texts from the Second Temple period. In Chapter Three I will analyze how the author of

²⁴ Ibid., 195.

²⁵ Louis H. Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible* (JSJSup 58; Leiden: Brill, 1998).

the book of *Jubilees* translates the narrative of Babel to argue for linguistic purity as a marker of identity. In Chapter Four, Pseudo-Philo's reading of Babel as a model of proper trust in the face of religious persecution will be explored. I will argue that Josephus will seek out the political message of the folly of the Babelites in Chapter Five. A focus on the eternal truths of God's governance of the world in 3 (*Greek*) *Baruch* will be the subject of Chapter Six. Philo's attempt to translate the tower into a philosophical narrative on the importance of true community will be the focus of Chapter Seven. Each version will rewrite Babel for its own purposes.

The quote which opens this section of the work is foundational for my understanding of all the works examined here. Each work attempts to retell the narrative of Babel because it hopes to keep the narrative relevant and meaningful. The various authors are all intent on guiding the "evolution of the culture" which is theirs by "birth or adoption." In order for the narrative of Babel to continue, the tower must be translated. Canonical Babel must be betrayed.

CHAPTER THREE

THE HOLY LANGUAGE IN THE BOOK OF *JUBILEES*: THE TOWER OF BABEL AND THE ECLIPSE OF SACRED TRADITION

In translation, two ages and cultures—more strictly, two groups or conglomerates of culture—are held in tension, each reworked in the light of the other and further refracted by a range of other forces.¹

When a language dies, a possible world dies with it.²

1. *Introduction*

The book commonly known as *Jubilees* (*Masthafa Kufale* or the *Book of Divisions* in the Ethiopic tradition) contains the earliest known Jewish rewriting of the narrative of Babel.³ The work is a retelling of the books of Genesis and the first portion of the book of Exodus (Gen 1–Exod 12). The work was originally composed in Hebrew, although the text as a whole has been preserved only in Ethiopic.⁴ Fragmentary evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls indicates “as far as can be ascertained, the published Hebrew fragments show that the Ethiopic translation is a rather faithful one.”⁵ VanderKam has surveyed the various genre labels suggested for the work:

¹ Sukanta Chaudhuri, *Translation and Understanding* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10.

² George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language & Translation* (3d. ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xiv.

³ I exclude the question of the Septuagint which probably also has a right to the title of earliest retelling. See Chapter Seven, below, for a fuller discussion of the Septuagint.

⁴ The work is considered canonical for the Orthodox Church in Ethiopia and follows the Book of Deuteronomy.

⁵ J.T.A.G.M. Van Ruiten, *Primeaval History Interpreted: The Rewriting of Genesis 1–11 in the Book of Jubilees* (JSJSup 66; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 2. See also, by the same author, “Biblical Interpretation in the Book of *Jubilees*: The Case of the Early Abram (*Jub.* 11:14–12:15),” in *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism* (ed. Matthias Henze; Grand Rapids,

In the relatively short history of scholarship on *Jubilees*, a number of terms have been used to designate its literary genre. It has been termed an expanded targum of Genesis-Exodus, a haggadic commentary on the first two books of the Bible, and a work illustrating the midrashic tendency evident in the books of Chronicles. There is a measure of truth to all of these proposals In contemporary scholarship *Jubilees* is commonly assigned to the category of Rewritten Bible.⁶

Jubilees is, in fact, often treated as the model for rewritten Bible, although VanderKam is ultimately unsatisfied with all of the above designations. He even debates the usefulness of the term rewritten Bible which, "insofar as many second-temple books or sections of books fall into this category ... is not especially useful for distinguishing a composition."⁷ Regardless of the genre-label attached to *Jubilees*, the narrative presents *itself* as an additional revelation granted to Moses on Mount Sinai by God via the angel of the Presence.⁸ The work asserts that during Moses' forty-day sojourn on Mount Sinai, God reveals two separate works: the public version of the Torah (Torah-Commandment תורה מצוה) which communicates the terms of the divine covenant to the people of Israel and a second work (Torah-Admonition תורה תעודה) which provides a supra-historical overview from the creation of the world until the eschaton.⁹ The deity instructs Moses to

write all these words which I will tell you on this mountain: the former and the later, and what will occur to them (the Israelites) in all the Divisions of the Times, according to the Torah-Admonition and for the weekly years of the jubilees until the end of time, when I shall descend and dwell with them until the end of time.¹⁰ (*Jub.* 1:26)

The explicit purpose of this second revelation is to demonstrate the faithfulness of God to the covenant despite the continuing apostasy and faithless-

MI: Eerdmanns, 2012), 156. For the critical version of the Hebrew fragments of the work, see James C. VanderKam and Jozef T. Milik, "Jubilees," in *Qumran Cave 4. VIII: Parabiblical Texts, Part I* (ed. Harry W. Attridge, et al.; DJD XIII; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 1–185.

⁶ James C. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees* (Guides to Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 135. Henceforth, VanderKam 2001.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See James Kugel, "The Image of Moses in the Book of Jubilees," *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* (2012): 77–92.

⁹ I borrow the terms Torah-Commandment and Torah-Admonition from the work of B.Z. Wacholder, "Jubilees as Super-Canon. Torah Admonition versus Torah Commandment," in *Legal Texts and Legal Issues. Proceedings of the Second Meeting of the International Organization for Qumran Studies. Cambridge, 1995. Published in Honor of Joseph M. Baumgarten* (ed. M. Bernstein, F. García Martínez, and J. Kampen; STDJ 23; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 195–211.

¹⁰ According to Wacholder translation.

ness of the people of Israel.¹¹ *Jubilees* serves simultaneously as indictment for the failure of the people of Israel to keep the covenant as well as assurance of divine forbearance and ultimate (eschatological) restoration of the people of Israel.

The purpose of this literary presentation is a matter of some debate. To put the matter simply: did the author of the book of *Jubilees* intend the work to replace the Torah of Moses? The question is vexing because it is difficult to determine the precise level of authority accorded to the Torah and the nature of such authority when the composition of *Jubilees* was taking place. It is also difficult to resolve this particular issue because the text of *Jubilees* does not discuss the topic explicitly. It is possible, however, to argue that *Jubilees* does attempt to replace the Mosaic Torah at the *functional level*. The books of Moses mean, finally, only what the author of *Jubilees* says they mean. "Once the rewriter integrated his thoughts within the Torah itself," claims Segal,

they became part of the accepted and authoritative collection of beliefs and ideas. Although the views expressed in *Jubilees* sometimes contradict those expressed in the Pentateuch, their presentation within the biblical framework granted them legitimacy in the eyes of the target audience.¹²

Wacholder has argued that the book serves as a type of *super-canon* which attempted to assimilate and subsume the Torah shared by all forms of Second Temple Judaism within its larger interpretive scheme.¹³ He claims:

The Torah stored in the side of the ark [i.e., *Jubilees*], though superior to the public, or open, Torah is not intended to be a replacement. Both Torahs are

¹¹ Wacholder suggests that the notion of a second revelation arose from an early attempt to harmonize Deut 31:9 with Deut 31:25–26. In Deut 31:9, Moses gives to the Levites and the elders "this law." A few verses later, however, Moses gives "this book of the law" to the Levites alone and asks them to place it "by the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may be there as a witness against you." Wacholder explains that "this twice given account of the transfer of the law requires an explanation. The author of *Jubilees* ... resolved the redundancy by associating the public copy with the Torah-Commandment and the stored one with the Torah-Admonition." (Wacholder, "Jubilees as Super-Canon," 200.)

¹² Michael Segal, *The Book of Jubilees: Rewritten Bible, Redaction, Ideology and Theology* (JSJSup 117; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 5.

¹³ B.Z. Wacholder, "Jubilees as Super-Canon," 195–211. Wacholder points to the use and interpretation of the book of *Jubilees* by sectarian groups at Qumran as evidence of its super-canonical status. "Virtually all extant sectarian documents from Qumran drawn from or paraphrase the Torah-Admonition to the extent that when not otherwise specified, the term Torah refers to *Jubilees*, as well as the traditional Torah. In other words, when they spoke of Torah they meant Genesis as it is represented in *Jubilees*" (Wacholder, "Jubilees as Super-Canon," 209).

frequently alluded to as if they are a single authority, but apparent contradictions between them are always resolved in favor of the Jubilean version.¹⁴

How much space one wishes to allow between *replace* and *superior* is a matter of some debate. It could fairly be said that *Jubilees* presents an imperialistic hermeneutic. In numerous ways, great and small, the author of *Jubilees* rewrites the Mosaic Torah to accentuate particular theological principles. The insistence on a solar calendar for the setting of various festivals is only the most well-known theological ax which the author of *Jubilees* seeks to grind. The author of *Jubilees* also portrays the patriarchs celebrating festivals missing from Genesis and introduces legal teachings from later in the Torah into the earliest of biblical narratives (see the merging of Lev 12 and Gen 2:8, 22 in *Jub.* 3:8–14). *Jubilees* presents a strong rewriting of the canonical version. One final element of *Jubilees*' relationship to the Pentateuch should be noted. The author claims that the book of *Jubilees* was revealed to Moses by the angel of the Presence who recited the words written on heavenly tablets. The work is a physical manifestation in historical time of an eternally inscribed text. As such, the ability to both read and write such texts takes on added importance.¹⁵ This will be of special significance for *Jubilees*' reading of the tower narrative.

Turning from the rhetoric of *Jubilees* to questions of historical background, VanderKam has argued that *Jubilees* was produced during a moment of acute identity crisis in ancient Judaism and as a response to a perceived tide of assimilationism during the Hellenistic period. He has suggested a narrow window of time during which the work would have likely been composed. He asserts "one can date the book fairly narrowly to between 160 and 150 BCE."¹⁶ Segal has highlighted four elements used by VanderKam in dating the work:

References in *Jubilees* to historical events; the paleographic evidence of the Qumran copies of *Jubilees*; the dependence of *Jubilees* upon earlier compositions; the attitude towards the rest of the nation expressed in *Jubilees*.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 196.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the importance of the written text in *Jubilees* see Hindy Najman, "Interpretation as Primordial Writing: Jubilees and Its Authority Conferring Strategies," *JSJ* 30 (1999): 379–410. On the function of the heavenly tablets, see F. García Martínez, "The Heavenly Tablets in the Book of Jubilees," in *Studies in the Book of Jubilees* (ed. Matthias Albani, Jörg Frey, and Armin Lange; TSAJ 65; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 243–260.

¹⁶ James C. VanderKam, "The Origins and Purposes of the Book of Jubilees," in *Studies in the Book of Jubilees* (ed. Matthias Albani, Jörg Frey, and Armin Lange; TSAJ 65; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 20.

¹⁷ Segal, *The Book of Jubilees*, 35.

Competing versions of Judaism serves as the background for reading the work. Most directly, VanderKam views *Jubilees* as a rebuke to constructions of Judaism during the Second Temple period which sought to downplay the distinctiveness and separate nature of Jewish belief and practice.¹⁸ The book of Genesis famously depicts the ancestors of Israel engaging in activities expressly forbidden by Mosaic Law (Jacob sets up a pillar at Bethel in Gen 28:18, Abraham is married to his sister in violation of Lev 18:9, etc.). Some Jewish groups in antiquity might logically have appealed to the pre-Sinai period of the ancestors as scriptural warrant for a faithful lifestyle that did not require strict separation from among the nations and was less concerned with keeping the details of Torah. VanderKam claims that:

Jubilees' emphatic insistence on the election of the Jewish people from the very beginning and on the claim that pre-mosaic ancestors lived according to the pentateuchal law directly addressed such issues. The writer says in effect there never was such a pristine, 'golden' time.¹⁹

Strict separation from non-Jews and the binding authority of Mosaic Law is built into the very fabric of creation in *Jubilees*. Wintermute states the situation in a more evaluative (and negative) sense:

his (the author's) view of God's intent for Israel vis-à-vis the other nations ... falls short of Second Isaiah's 'light of the nations' (Isa. 42:6) or Jonah's mission to Nineveh, siding instead with the Chronicler in calling for a rejection of all things gentile.²⁰

Such a focus will effect every aspect of the work's rewriting of biblical narrative. It would not be correct, however, to view the work as driven by an ideology of separation alone as *Jubilees* makes its ideological arguments with exegetical acumen. It is a work deeply involved in the exegesis of the written text of the Torah. The fact that such exegesis occurs within the confines of a particular theological understanding of Judaism does not make the interpretive moves of *Jubilees* any less exegetical. If VanderKam is correct about the context in which the *Jubilees* was composed—an intense and conflicted encounter between traditional Jewish practice and belief and a

¹⁸ VanderKam draws here on the evidence of the Hellenizers mentioned in 1 Macc. 1:11. "In those days, certain renegades came out from Israel and misled many, saying, 'Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles around us, for since we separated from them many disasters have come upon us.'"

¹⁹ VanderKam, "The Origins and Purposes of the Book of *Jubilees*," 21.

²⁰ O.S. Wintermute, "*Jubilees*: A New Translation and Introduction," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume II* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1985), 47.

strong attraction among some Jews to larger Hellenistic cultural norms—it is not surprising that translation of a cultural classic such as the book of Genesis was felt to be necessary. We encounter here clearly “two ages and cultures ... held in tension.” The author of *Jubilees* was translating a foundational text of his culture so that it might speak to (and shape!) the concerns of a new day.

The account of Babel found in *Jubilees* 10:18–26, while brief, is markedly different from its canonical counterpart.²¹ We are, for example, introduced to the curious notice that the builders of the tower were engaged in their labors for forty-three years and that Yahweh was not alone when he descended to punish the Babelites. The destruction of the tower, an event not narrated in the biblical text at all, will be credited to a “great wind” and the name of the location of the city and tower will possess a correspondingly different etymology from the one given in the biblical text. These differences are interesting in their own right, yet it is the larger narrative function played by the account of Babel in *Jubilees* that will demonstrate how the narrative has been translated. I would contrast the approach adopted here with that of Van Ruiten, who has produced an insightful and detailed commentary on the multiple ways in which *Jubilees* alters and rewrites the canonical text.²² His approach is primarily redactional, placing both texts side by side and attempting to explain the differences. This approach, as noted by Huizenga in his study of the *Akedah* in *Jubilees*, is consistent with how rewritten Bible is frequently approached.

This genre [re-written bible] lends itself well to redaction criticism, given that its members are exercises in reworking previous texts. Thus, scholars often interpret works in this genre section-by-section with their biblical antecedents.²³

Huizenga cautions, however, that such an approach can overlook the new narrative that is created in the rewritten version.

Often omitted, however, are synchronic, compositional approaches to the final narrative. Often an author makes changes to previous material not simply for diachronic, redactional reasons, but also for synchronic, narrative concerns.²⁴

²¹ For a discussion of the Tower of Babel in *Jubilees*, see Christoph Uehlinger, *Weltreich und ‘Eine Rede’: Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerzahlung (Gen 11. 1–9)* (OBO 101; Fribourg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 101–109.

²² For his discussion of Babel, see Van Ruiten, *Primeaval History Interpreted*, 348–360.

²³ Leroy Andrew Huizenga, “The Battle for Isaac: Exploring the Composition and Function of the *Akedah* in the Book of *Jubilees*,” *JSP* 31 (2002): 36.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

The author of *Jubilees*, in other words, does more than simply alter details. He rewrites Babel so as to integrate the new narrative into the larger concerns and issues of his work. Any understanding of Babel in *Jubilees* must explain both the omissions, additions and re-arrangements of material as well as the integration of the new narrative into the larger work. Let us turn now to the narrative of Babel as it is told by the author of *Jubilees*.

10:18 During the thirty-third Jubilee, in the first year in this second week, Peleg married a woman whose name was Lomna, the daughter of Sinaor. She gave birth to a son for him in the fourth year of this week, and he named him Ragew, for he said, 'Mankind has now become evil through the perverse plan to build themselves a city and tower in the land of Shinar.' 10:19 For they had emigrated from the land of Ararat toward the east, to Shinar, because in his lifetime they built the city and the tower, saying: 'Let us ascend through it to heaven.' 10:20 They began to build. In the fourth week they used fire for baking and brick served them as stone. The mud with which they were plastering was asphalt which comes from the sea and from the water springs in the land of Shinar. 10:21 They built it; they spent 43 years building it (with) complete bricks *whose width* was 13 (units) and whose height was the a third of one (unit). Its height rose to 5433 cubits, two spans, and thirteen stades. 10:22 Then Lord our God said to us: 'The people here are one, and they have begun to work. Now nothing will elude them. Come, let us go down and confuse their tongues so that they do not understand one another and are dispersed into cities and nations and one plan no longer remains with them until the day of judgment.' 10:23 So the Lord went down and we went down with him to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. 10:24 He confused every sound of their tongues; no one any longer understood what the other was saying. Then they stopped building the city and tower. 10:25 For this reason the whole land of Shinar was called Babel because there God confused all the tongues of mankind. From there they were dispersed into their cities, each according to their languages and their nations. 10:26 The Lord sent a wind at the tower and tipped it to the ground. It is now between Ashur and Babylon, in the land of Shinar. He named it the Collapse.²⁵ (*Jub.* 10:18–26)

2. Translation as Re-contextualization

One mode of interpretation common in Jewish antiquity is re-arrangement or re-contextualization of narrative. It is admittedly difficult to identify interpretation by re-contextualization with absolute certainty because it is implicit exegesis in the best of circumstances. A narrative may conceivably

²⁵ All quotations from *Jubilees* are from the translation of James C. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees* (CSCO 511; Leuven: Peeters, 1989).

be re-contextualized with no intention of making an interpretive comment. Given the fact that the context of the canonical narrative of Babel is a *potential problem*, such re-contextualization can likely be inferred to be an attempt at an exegetical solution. I noted above that most modern interpreters of Babel have had to come to terms with the tension present between Gen 10 and Gen 11. How did humanity spread across the habitable world: natural migration of people according to clan and language or cataclysmic intervention by Yahweh? *Jubilees* will address this question by re-contextualizing the account of Babel and presenting it as a brief interlude within a larger discussion of the separation of the sons of Noah. The story of the tower is thereby subordinated and absorbed into a larger discussion of the separation of humanity based largely on Gen 10. This privileging of Gen 10 over the narrative of Babel as the definitive account of how human beings spread across the world is seen in a number of different ways. First, the rewriting of Gen 10 in the book of *Jubilees* is quite expansive in comparison with the rewriting of Gen 11 and includes a great deal of material not present in the biblical version.²⁶ Even more directly, *Jubilees* excises the beginning of the Babel narrative—the statement that “all the earth had one language.” The phrase “one language” does not occur in connection with the account of Babel in *Jubilees*; rather, it appears in *Jub.* 3:28 with regard to the silencing of the animals upon the expulsion of human beings from Eden. In this way, the new context eases the potential contradiction between Gen 10 and Gen 11.

Van Ruiten makes too much of the excision and substitution of the phrase “one language,” however, when he claims that the Jubilean version of Babel presupposes a multi-lingual society already existed at the time of the construction of the Tower of Babel. He argues that:

the author of *Jubilees* continuously tries to avoid any suggestion that in Shinar, mankind had only *one* language. In Babel, there was, therefore, not a confusion of one language, but a confusion of several languages. In line with the omission of Gen 11:1 is the use of the plural ‘languages’ instead of the singular in *Jub* 10:22 f., 25b.²⁷

²⁶ Van Ruiten claims that “*Jubilees* 8:10–9:15 is one of the most discussed passages in the *Book of Jubilees*. It fits into the context of research into the geographical representation of the inhabited world in the 2nd century BCE” (Van Ruiten, *Primeaval History*, 320, n. 29). For a discussion of the afterlife of Gen 10 in early Judaism and Christianity, see James M. Scott, *Geography in Early Judaism and Christianity: the Book of Jubilees* (SNTSMS 113; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁷ Van Ruiten, *Primeaval History*, 348.

Van Ruiten is certainly correct from a grammatical perspective. I would counter, however, that the author of *Jubilees*, despite the plurals noted by Van Ruiten, does not question the ‘diversification of language’ theme from the canonical Babel. *Jubilees* explicitly claims that, following the descent of Yahweh and his angels, “no one any longer understood what the other was saying” (*Jub.* 10:24). The implication is certainly that, before the intervention of Yahweh, humankind *was able* to understand one another. If inter-lingual communication was possible *before* the confusion of languages, it is not clear why it would not be possible *after* the confusion as well. Logically, it is not even clear how multiple languages *can be* confused. At best, it is possible the author of *Jubilees* is implying that human beings lost the ability to translate at Babel or that some form of *lingua franca* existed. Furthermore, Van Ruiten’s appeal to the presence of the phrase “one language” during *Jubilees*’ Eden narrative is also flawed. The latter text claims that, upon the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden

the mouths of all the animals, the cattle, the birds, everything that moves about were made incapable of speaking because all of them used to converse with one another in one language and one tongue. (*Jub.* 3:28)

The text seems to point to a conviction that humans and animals used to be able to speak with one another before the expulsion—not to a conviction that all animal *and* human language was confused after Eden. Such a conviction may be a result of an interpretive need to explain how a serpent was capable of tempting Eve with deceptive words. Language is not diversified with the expulsion from Eden; it is, rather, restricted to human beings alone.

The nature of the expansions to Gen 10 is also of significance for the Jubilean version of Babel. The first issue to note is that the separation of the sons of Noah gets off to a false start in *Jubilees*.

In the sixth year she [Azurad] gave birth to a son for him [Eber], and he named him Peleg because at the time when he was born Noah’s children began to divide the earth for themselves. For this reason he named him Peleg. They divided it in a bad way among themselves and told Noah. (*Jub* 8:8–9)

I noted above (in Chapter Two) the potential hermeneutical value of the figure of Peleg. This figure occurs both in a genealogy listed in Gen 10:25 and also after the account of Babel in 11:16. The importance of Peleg’s name is not, however, without confusion itself. To which separation does his name refer: the slow and steady genealogical dispersion or the separation wrought by Yahweh at Shinar? *Jubilees* suggests that Peleg is to be connected with an initial attempt at the separation of the sons of Noah based on Gen 10. The author clarifies the ambiguity surrounding the name of Peleg and integrates

him into the spread of humanity across the world. Van Ruiten claims that “compared with [the reference to Peleg in] Gen 10:25 the author of *Jubilees* makes the time more explicit (‘at the time when he was born’) and the actors (Noah’s children).”²⁸ The association of Peleg’s name with the separation of the sons of Noah may have encouraged the etymological connection of one of his children, Ragew/Rau, with the account of Babel. A second issue of note is the very fact of the abortive first attempt at the self-partitioning of the sons of Noah. The author of *Jubilees* asserts that the initial division which was presented to Noah was *bad* or *evil*, but no reason for its deficiency is supplied (other than, perhaps, the sons initiated it by themselves). Following this failed attempt, Noah will take control and, with the help of an angelic being and by consultation of a sacred book, divide the earth. The text of *Jubilees* reads:

When he summoned his children, they came to him—they and their children. He divided the earth into their lots which his three sons would occupy. They reached out their hands and took the book from the bosom of their father Noah. (*Jub.* 8:11)

Van Ruiten holds that “the second division is therefore presented as a divine and immutable disposition.”²⁹ The following material covers the various allotments of the earth to Shem, Ham and Japheth and to their children before concluding with the progeny of Noah invoking a curse on any future descendent who violates the division.

He [Noah] made (them) swear by oath to curse each and every one who wanted to occupy the share which did not emerge by his lot. All of them said, ‘So be it!’ (*Jub.* 9:14–15)

This lengthy addition on the part of the author of *Jubilees* has a profound repercussion for the interpretation of the Babel narrative. The first attempt by the sons themselves may indicate a brashness and self-sufficient attitude which will reappear in *Jubilees*’ version of Babel. The failure of the Babelites to disperse across the face of the earth, moreover, is now not to be associated with the Primeval Blessing to spread out and be fruitful (as is possible in the canonical version), but can be seen as a direct violation of a divinely sanctioned ordering of creation—codified in a written text and attended by angels. The ancestors of the Babelites have presumably even spoken a self-imprecatory curse against remaining in territory not allotted to them: “So be

²⁸ Van Ruiten, *Primeaval History*, 319–320.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

it for them and their children until eternity during their generations" (*Jub.* 9:15). The drastic intervention of Yahweh, the destruction of the city and the tower, is no longer in need of explanation. In this way, re-contextualization can even serve as divine apologia. Van Ruiten is correct in asserting that "the rewriting of the narrative in *Jub* 10:19–26 is partly an attempt to justify the behaviour of YHWH."³⁰

A final addition on the part of the author of *Jubilees* is potentially, if less directly, related to the narrative of Babel. *Jubilees* 10:1–14 is an important addition for the development of demonology in Second Temple Judaism.³¹ The narrative relates the persecution of the grandchildren of Noah by impure demons or wicked spirits. Noah appeals to Yahweh for deliverance and receives a partial reprieve.

10:3 Noah prayed before the Lord his God and said: "God of the Spirits which are in all animate beings ... may your mercy be lifted over the children of your children; and may the wicked spirits not rule them in order to destroy them from the Earth. 10:4 Now you bless me and my children so that we may increase, become numerous and fill the Earth. 10:5 You know how your Watchers, the fathers of these spirits, have acted during my lifetime. As for these spirits who have remained alive, imprison them and hold them captive in the place of judgment. May they not cause destruction among your servant's sons10:6 May they not have power over the sons of the righteous from now and forevermore."

10:8 When Mastema, the leader of the Spirits, came, he said: "Lord Creator, Leave some of them before me; let them listen to me and do everything that I tell them, because if none of them is left before me I shall not be able to exercise the authority of my will among mankind. For they are meant (for the purpose of) destroying and misleading before my punishment because the evil of mankind is great." 10:9 Then [God] said that a tenth of them should be left before him. (*Jub.* 10:3–6; 8–9)

The majority of these spirits will be bound and their persecution of humanity will cease.³² A small, select group, however, will continue. They will serve a necessary function in the on-going divine governance of the world. Of

³⁰ Ibid., 346.

³¹ See Segal, *The Book of Jubilees*, 174–180 for discussion of this passage in the context of larger discussions in Second Temple texts concerning the origin of evil in the world.

³² Van Ruiten contrasts the situation in *Jubilees* with a comparable passage in *1 Enoch*. In the latter, all of the descendants of the Watchers are allowed to harass humanity. "In *1 Enoch* all of the demons rise up against the children of men. In *Jubilees*, only one tenth of them will be a source of bother to mankind. Although the powers of evil are supernatural and have to do with Satan (= Mastema), their freedom is very limited. That means that in *Jubilees*, God is the master of history" (Van Ruiten, *Primeaval History*, 340).

direct interest to our purposes is the notion that these spirits are descendants of the Watchers. They are the Nephilim, the men of renown, mentioned in Gen 6. While the descendants of Noah are taught how to avoid physical sickness brought about by the spirits (herbal remedies taught to Noah by angels and, once again, written down in a book), there is no mention of how the children and grand-children of Noah are to avoid the non-physical attacks of these spirits. Despite the attrition of their cohort, the sons of the Watchers—under the leadership of Mastema³³—remain a force with which to be reckoned. It is certainly true that *post hoc ergo propter hoc* is both a logical and literary fallacy. There is no necessary connection between two chronological events, in *real* or *literary* time. It is, however, interesting to note that the account of the pollution of the spirits is immediately followed by *Jubilees'* version of Babel. The possibility of a correlation between these two narratives is present. Or, to put the matter more directly: in *Jubilees* the account of Babel can be read in demonic juxtaposition. Both the thoughts and actions of the Babelites can now be read in light of demonic influence by the Nephilim, the men of the name. If such an impression is intended by the author of *Jubilees*, it remains implicit. The re-contextualization of the Babel narrative in *Jubilees* is a subtle, yet powerful, argument for reading the biblical version as an account of rebellious humanity willfully disobeying the divine order of separation—potentially under demonic influence. In the *Book of Divisions* it is hard to imagine a more heinous trespass than failing to occupy one's proper place in the divinely established and codified order.

3. Characterization and Motivation

Characterization and motivation of both divine and human actors are addressed directly in *Jubilees*. The Jubilean version of Babel opens with a very blunt statement. "Mankind has now become evil through the perverse plan to build themselves a city and a tower in the land of Shinar" (*Jub* 10:18). There are two issues of interest in this short passage. How, first of all, does the ancient exegete determine that the builders have become evil? The author of *Jubilees* examines the name of the son of Peleg, Ragew/Rau, taken from the genealogical list which *follows* the biblical account of the tower in Gen

³³ For a discussion of the figure of Mastema, see J.W. van Henten, "Mastema," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 523–524.

11:18. The original Hebrew is רָעָה.³⁴ For the author of *Jubilees*, the name of the child is related to the Hebrew term for Evil.³⁵ Presumably, a close reader of the larger context of the biblical version of the tower story in its literary environment would have noticed the unfortunate potential meaning of the name of this son of Peleg and sought a rationale for such a name. Admittedly, it is difficult to believe that the evil characterization of the Babelites was solely the *result* of the interpretation presented here. It is much more likely that the view of the Babelites as evil preceded and called for the exegetical justification found in *Jubilees*. To a reader predisposed towards a negative view of the tower builders, however, the name Ragew/Rau would have been as close to divine validation as possible.

A second element of interest is the translation of narrative style itself. The Jubilean account opens with Peleg explaining to his wife why he chooses to name his son Ragew/Rau. (Wishing to name one's son "Evil" would probably require some spousal consultation.)³⁶ Readers are not invited to work their way into this narrative; the laconic style of the canonical version is totally absent. The graceful division of narrative between human and divine subjects, the practiced reticence of narrative voice, the intricate repetition of phraseology, the very symmetry of the canonical Babel is shattered in *Jubilees*. In contrast to the canonical Babel, there are precious few gaps to be filled as everything is given at the beginning of *Jubilees*' rewriting. The reader is simply informed that the people have become evil because of their perverse plan. This attempt at providing a strong characterization of the Babelites is successful both because of what it provides and because of what it obscures. A key element of the biblical version of Babel is the desire of the people to avoid being scattered. The construction of the city and tower is somehow connected to the desire of the people to stay together in one place and "make a name." These elements of the biblical version are wholly lacking in *Jubilees*. There is no discussion of fear and the element of name-making—which one might think the author of *Jubilees* could utilize to criticize the Babelites—is ignored. The Babelites are evil and their choice to build is simply a manifestation of such evil. Questions regarding their fearfulness or even ambition are elided. *Jubilees* presents a reductionist reading, as all

³⁴ VanderKam suggests that the Ethiopic may be understood by recourse to the Septuagintal rendering of the name, Πάγος. (VanderKam 1989, *Book of Jubilees*, 61).

³⁵ This is most likely a false etymology. See Van Ruiten, *Primeaval History*, 344.

³⁶ The inclusion of women in the narrative of *Jubilees* has been the subject of a study by Betsy Halpern-Amaru, *The Empowerment of Women in the Book of Jubilees* (JSJSup 60; Leiden: Brill, 1999).

ambiguity of characterization has been removed from its version of Babel. Determining the motivation of the Babelites is a different matter, however.

If the author of *Jubilees* has obscured some of the positive reasons for the construction of a city and a tower—making of a name or avoidance of scattering—he has magnified the more negative elements. This is most clearly seen with regard to the tower. But even here ambiguity is present. The attempted clarification of the motivation of the builders in *Jubilees* rests on a short phrase: the people build the tower because they wish to “ascend through it to heaven.” The rationale for the tower was one of the largest gaps present in the biblical narrative. Much of the secondary literature points to *Jubilees* as the foundation or earliest articulation for a line of interpretation which holds that the tower was to be used as a platform for a ‘war against God.’³⁷ While this is a possibility, I do not believe it is the only one. *Jubilees* does not present an unambiguous rationale for the building of the tower. It is not difficult to see the connection between the biblical description of a tower “with its head in the heavens” and the Jubilean claim that the people wished to ascend to the heavens by means of the tower. But why does the author of *Jubilees* present it as evidence of the evil nature of the builders? The default answer—based on the evidence of other Second Temple and rabbinic works—is that the people are ascending to wage war against God. But *Jubilees* does not say this and it is difficult to believe that *Jubilees* is being reticent here by only alluding to a larger interpretive tradition which the audience knows (although I grant that is a possibility). There is nothing, furthermore, in the text of *Jubilees* itself that would prepare us for such a desire on the part of the people. Another way is needed to understand the people’s search to ascend to heaven. A more fruitful line of inquiry would explore the importance of the heavens and knowledge of the heavens in the book of *Jubilees*. Why might celestial ascent be desirable or condemnable in the narrative world created by *Jubilees*? Is a bellicose interpretation really the only one possible? Answering this question would go a long way towards explaining what the account of Babel might signify in the book of *Jubilees*.

What is needed to grasp the motivation of the Babelites in *Jubilees* is a brief exploration of the issue of astral knowledge. Astrology/Astronomy was

³⁷ Kugel assigns the passage to the exegetical motif, ‘they tried to storm heaven.’ He does, however, make a distinction between sources which claim the people are climbing to heaven and those sources which posit the ascent as a war against the divine (Kugel, *The Bible as it Was*, 123–124). Given the fact that he chooses the term ‘storm’ to describe the ascent, however, I am unclear as to the difference.

a controversial topic in ancient Judaism (as it is in the Hebrew Bible).³⁸ It is explicitly condemned in a number of places (Deut 4:19; 18:10; Isa 47:13). Second Temple texts, curiously, do not wholly conform to this biblical prohibition. Josephus famously depicts Abraham as teaching the mysteries of the stars to the Egyptians (*A.J.* 1.154–168) and this is presented as a mark of his wisdom. Other texts (*Jub.* 12:17–18; Philo's *Abr.* 69–71 and *QG* 3:1; and Pseudo-Philo's *L.A.B.* 18:5), however, present patriarchal rejection of astral observation as a meritorious deed which leads both to conversion to monotheism and serves as incitement for the divine call of Abram. Annette Reed has argued that there is a functional parallel in many texts from the Second Temple period between astrology/astronomy and idolatry.

The association between Abraham and astronomy/astrology is used to assert the patriarch's worthiness of the promises granted to him without explanation in Gen 12:1–19. As with idolatry in the functionally parallel traditions about Abraham's rejection of the religion of his father Terah ... astronomy/astrology is here treated as paradigmatic of the 'pagan' religion and culture that the father of the Jews abandoned—and, by extension, as symbolic of the polytheistic and/or non-biblical religions that these exegetes encountered in their own daily lives.³⁹

The book of *Jubilees* has a mixed approach to the study of the heavens. Reed lists *Jubilees* as a work which premises the call of Abram on his rejection of the study of the stars. The heavens, however, are very important to the theological system present in the larger work. It is only through the observation of the heavenly realm that the festivals and Sabbaths can be observed properly according to the Jubilean view (e.g., *Jub.* 2:9; 6:34). Furthermore, one of the heroes of *Jubilees* (and of a great deal of Second Temple literature) is the figure of Enoch.⁴⁰ His exalted knowledge is especially connected to

³⁸ For a full discussion related to ancient Jewish attitudes, see Annette Yoshiko Reed, "Abraham as Chaldean Scientist and Father of the Jews: Josephus, Antiquities 1.154–168, and the Greco-Roman Discourse About Astronomy/Astrology," *JStJ* 35 (2004): 119–158. Reed uses the terms astrology/astronomy interchangeably—as do I—in her work. She claims that "by referring to 'astronomy/astrology' as a single complex, I mean to stress the fact that the Greek terms *ἀστρονομία* and *ἀστρολογία* can both encompass what we call 'astronomy' and 'astrology.' In light of the modern attitudes towards the latter, it is important to emphasize the 'scientific' and divinatory aspects of the pre-modern study of the stars were often imperceptible in both practice and perception" (Reed, "Abraham as Chaldean Scientist," 122); see also James H. Charlesworth, "Jewish astrology in the Talmud, Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and early Palestinian synagogues," *HTR* 70 (1977): 183–200.

³⁹ Reed, "Abraham and Chaldean Scientist," 125–126.

⁴⁰ James C. VanderKam, *Enoch and the Growth of an Apocalyptic Tradition* (Washington D.C., The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1984).

observation of the heavenly realms and divinely granted knowledge of its celestial secrets. *Jubilees* says of him:

[Enoch] was the first of mankind who were born on the earth who learned (the art of) writing, instruction, and wisdom and who wrote down in a book the *signs of the sky* in accord with the fixed pattern of their months so that mankind would know the seasons of the years according to the fixed pattern of each of their months. He was the first to write a testimony.⁴¹ (*Jub.* 4:17–18)

Excessive or unauthorized knowledge of the heavenly realm, however, can also be problematic. *Jubilees* presents an anti-type to the figure of Enoch, Cainan, who surreptitiously gains access to the forbidden astrological knowledge of the Watchers/Nephilim.⁴² Interestingly, he discovers these writings in his search for an appropriate site to build a city.

He [Cainan] found a writing which the ancestors had incised in a rock. He read what was in it, copied it, and sinned on the basis of what was in it, since it was the Watchers' teachings by which they used to observe the omens of the sun, moon, and stars and every heavenly sign. He wrote it down but told no one about it because he was afraid to tell Noah about it lest he become angry with him. (*Jub.* 8:3–4)

Enoch is praised for his knowledge of the heavenly realms, Cainan condemned. Given the narrative role played by the heavens and human attempts to grasp at knowledge of the heavens, it is not clear that the sin of the Babelites in *Jubilees* is a desire to storm the heavens, to wage war against God. It may, rather, be an attempt to grasp celestial knowledge without divine approval. The city-building Babelites would be worthy successors to Cainan the city-builder. The additional fact that Babylonia was widely regarded as the birthplace of astrological/astronomical knowledge in the ancient world makes such an interpretation even more compelling.⁴³

⁴¹ Italics mine. The cultural background for this passage is the apparent claim by many of the conquered peoples of the Hellenistic period—particularly the former super-powers of Egypt and Babylonia—that they possessed superior records (either of history, 'scientific' knowledge, etc.) which stretched all the way back to the origin of civilization. Reed points to a famous account of an Egyptian priest in Plato's *Timaeus* as evidence for this type of argument (Reed, "Abraham as Chaldean Scientist," 136).

⁴² Reed claims that "just as a number of Jewish traditions, both early and late, identify astral worship as the first type of pagan worship to develop (e.g., LAB 4:16), so the origins of astronomy/astrology is commonly associated with the descent of the fallen angels (e.g., 1 Enoch 8:3)" (Reed, "Abraham as Chaldean Scientist," 126, n. 18).

⁴³ For a discussion of cultural claims concerning the study of the stars in the Hellenistic period, see Reed, "Abraham as Chaldean Scientist," 139. The author of the *Babyloniaca*, Berosus, did much to argue for Babylonia's dominance in the arts of astral investigation.

4. *The Language of Revelation in Jubilees*

What is the narrative function of Babel in the canonical book of Genesis? According to a number of modern interpretations, the narrative serves to demarcate the primeval period (Gen 1–11) from the emergence of the ancestors of Israel. To recall the words of von Rad, the narrative of Babel is the “capstone” of the Primeval History, the last sin of a cycle of transgressions and the necessary cause for the call of Abram. But in *Jubilees* Babel is not a line which divides Primeval History from the sacred history of Israel; it is, rather, a narrow gate wherein access to sacred tradition itself must briefly perish in the on-going revelation of the divine will to the people of Israel. Babel marks the (momentary) eclipse of sacred tradition.

The story of the building of the tower, therefore, mediates for the author and readership of *Jubilees* other concerns than those present (implicitly or explicitly) in the biblical account. There is a larger message that the author of *Jubilees* wished to convey with his rewritten version of Babel. The re-contextualization of the narrative, the strong characterization of the Babelites and the specification of their motivation all work together to create a translation of the narrative. I noted above that Van Ruiten has suggested that the changes and re-arrangements were meant to protect the divine reputation. The punishment meted out by God must be seen to be justified and fair. That is certainly part of the purpose, but there is more. The Jubilean Babel is an important episode in a larger narrative arc in *Jubilees* about the communication of sacred knowledge and the status of Hebrew as the primordial and only acceptable language of revelation. These twin concerns are inseparable in *Jubilees*. Najman has gone so far as to state that “lurking beneath every aspect of the book of Jubilees is its fascination with the importance and authorizing power of writings.”⁴⁴ *Jubilees* is not only concerned with writing as such, however, but with texts composed in the revelatory language of Hebrew. It is not possible to separate these two concerns. Speculation about the original language of creation was widespread in the ancient world.⁴⁵ As Rubin has argued, this search for the primordial language was often tied to polemical arguments about

⁴⁴ Najman, “Interpretation as Primordial Writing,” 381. I have already noted the positive role which writing plays with regard to Enoch and Noah and the negative evaluation of writing in connection with Cainan.

⁴⁵ Milka Rubin, “The Language of Creation or the Primordial Language: A Case of Cultural Polemics in Antiquity,” *JJS* 49 (1998): 306–333.

cultural antiquity, which were almost always also arguments for cultural superiority. Claims about primordial language were therefore also assertions of revelatory power.

“Revelation in a certain language brought about not only sanctification of the writings,” says Rubin, “but sanctification of the language in which the revelation was made along with it. The language of revelation would be considered the ‘language of truth’, a vehicle of direct contact with the Deity.”⁴⁶

Jubilees contributes to this debate and the narrative of Babel plays, unsurprisingly, an important role.

The Jubilean Babel is, possibly, the earliest reflection on the language of creation or, as it will be called in later Jewish tradition, לְשׁוֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ.⁴⁷ Rubin highlights the appearance of this phrase in a fragmentary text from Qumran,⁴⁸ which:

although quite damaged, seems to convey ... that the language that was confused in Babel remained only with Abram, or perhaps was given back to him, according to the version in *Jubilees* ... the Hebrew language called in *Jubilees* both Hebrew and the ‘revealed’ language is called [in the fragment] *Lashon Haqodesh*, ‘the language of the holy’ (later to be understood as ‘the holy language’). This is the first occurrence of this term which later becomes very common.⁴⁹

There is some dispute over the exact meaning of the phrase. It likely originally meant something like the ‘language of the temple.’ Seth Schwartz—speaking of later usages of the term—claims that the use of the phrase is:

a striking aspect of the rabbinic ideology of Hebrew ... thought commonly translated as ‘holy tongue’, the expression probably originally meant ‘temple language.’ It is likely that at some point in the history of the rabbinic movement, its original meaning was forgotten, though the Rabbis can never have been wholly unaware of such linguistic parallels as *sheqel haqodesh*, whose reference to the Temple was unmistakable.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Rubin, “Language,” 307.

⁴⁷ To be clear: it does not seem that *Jubilees* actually makes use of the phrase. It refers to the “revealed language.”

⁴⁸ The fragment is 4Q464, frag. 3.I. See Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J.C. Tigchelaar, eds. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition: Volume 2 (4Q274–11Q31)* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 942–943. The phrase לְשׁוֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ is extant and is preceded by a partial Hebrew term (רִא ...). The text continues with a quotation from Zeph 3:9 (see discussion in Chapter Two, above).

⁴⁹ Rubin, “Language of Creation,” 310–311.

⁵⁰ Seth Schwartz, “Language, Power, and Identity in Ancient Palestine,” *Past and Present* 148 (1995): 33.

Early rabbinic sources, however, seem to understand the later element (שִׁקְיָהּ) as a reference to the Divine.⁵¹ For *Jubilees* there is no question concerning the identity of the holy language; it is explicitly equated with Hebrew (*Jub.* 12:26). The true focus is on transmission of knowledge of the sacred language and the divinely inspired texts composed in the language of creation. Who has access to the revealed language is a central concern for the author and *Jubilees* as a whole is preoccupied with issues surrounding the transmission of sacred knowledge. Such transmission characteristically takes place between a father and his children by means of instruction in written teachings. “His father taught him (the art) of writing” is a recurrent phrase throughout the book of *Jubilees* (*Jub.* 4:17; 8:2; 11:6). Sacred knowledge is consistently associated with what is recorded and written down in a book. VanderKam has highlighted this aspect of *Jubilees*’ presentation:

the author teaches that there was an authoritative written tradition, beginning with Enoch before the flood and extending through the patriarchal period to Moses’ time. The successive heads of the chosen line would add to that deposit before transmitting it in writing to their favorite sons.⁵²

The language of such sacred composition was Hebrew. *Jubilees* asserts that Hebrew was the primordial language of all humanity until the time of the collapse of the tower. This element is not explicitly present in the Jubilean version of Babel itself, but is found in a later account of the call of Abram. The angelic narrator is directed to reveal the sacred language of Hebrew to Abram:

12:25 Then the Lord God said to me: “Open his mouth and his ears to hear and speak with his tongue in the revealed language.” For from the day of the collapse it had disappeared from the mouth(s) of all mankind. 12:26 I opened his mouth, ears, and lips and began to speak Hebrew with him—in the language of creation. 12:27 He took his father’s books (they were written in Hebrew) and began to copy them. From that time he began to study them, while I was telling him everything that he was unable (to understand).

(*Jub.* 12:25–27)

Here is yet another line of evidence against the claim by Van Ruiten that Hebrew ceased to be spoken with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden and the silencing of the animals. His insistence that Babel was multilingual

⁵¹ Rubin points to *y. Meg.* 1b as evidence for the later interpretation (Rubin, “Language of Creation,” 311, n. 23). For a discussion of the Qumran fragment 4Q464, see E. Eshel and M. Stone, “*Leshon Haqodesh* in the End of Days in the Light of a Fragment from Qumran,” *Tarbiz* 62 (1993): 169–177 [Hebrew].

⁵² VanderKam, *Jubilees*, 120.

in *Jubilees* is even more curious because Van Ruiten himself notes that the reference to ‘collapse’ in the story of the renewal of Hebrew during Abraham’s time is ambiguous. He points out that “the word ‘collapse’ [in Ethiopic] is the same as used as the name for the fallen Tower of Babel (cf. *Jub.* 10:26).”⁵³

At any rate, the supposed eclipse of Hebrew at Babel is *Jubilees*’ most important contribution to the discussion of *Leshon Haqodesh*.⁵⁴ Yahweh does more than just confuse languages in the Jubilean account; he removes Hebrew from linguistic circulation. In fact, as the human relationship with the divine worsens in the book of *Jubilees* there is a narrowing of linguistic options. After the initial debacle in the Garden of Eden, the animals lose their ability to communicate with human beings.⁵⁵ All of humanity apparently utilizes Hebrew from Eden until Babel. Recall that Cainan is able to read the secret writings of the Watchers and that the astrological knowledge therein leads him to sin. It is only at Babel, with the brazen attempt to ascend to the heavens *en masse*, that Hebrew disappears completely. The impetus for the revelation of Hebrew is equally important, however. The Hebrew language will only be revealed to Abram after his observation of the stars and his proclamation of their subordination to the will of the One God.

12:16 In the sixth week, during its fifth year, Abram sat at night—at the beginning of the seventh month—to observe the stars from evening to dawn in order to see what would be the character of the year with respect to the rains. He was sitting and observing by himself. 12:17 A voice came to his mind and he said: “All the signs of the stars and signs of the moon and sun—all are under the Lord’s control. Why should I be investigating (them)? 12:18 If he wishes he will make it rain in the morning and in the evening; and if he wishes, he will not make it fall. Everything is under his control.”

(*Jub.* 12:16–18)

⁵³ Van Ruiten, *Primeaval History*, 348.

⁵⁴ See Reinhard G. Kratz, “‘Offnen seine Mund und seine Ohren’: Wie Abraham Hebraisch lernte,” in *Abraham unser Vater: Die gemeinsamen Wurzeln von Judentum, Christentum und Islam* (ed. Reinard G. Kratz and Tilman Nagel; Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003), 53–65.

⁵⁵ Van Ruiten holds that the removal of speech from the animals is an aggadic elaboration. “The clue in the text might be that the serpent uses words to tempt the woman (Gen 3:1–5). Because the serpent spoke to the woman, all animals were made incapable of speaking” (Van Ruiten, *Primeaval History*, 107). While this is a compelling argument, the notion that animals once communicated with human beings in the golden age is a common trope among many Greek authors as well. It is possible that the author of *Jubilees* was familiar with such traditions. See Deborah Gera, *Ancient Greek Ideas on Language, Speech and Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 57–67. The ability of animals and humans to speak with one another is connected to their being members of the same class of beings. This also explains why vegetarianism is preferred in accounts of the idyllic age.

In contrast to the Babelites, Abram models an appropriate response to the heavens and is thereby permitted to learn the sacred language and teach it to his children.⁵⁶ The ability to speak and comprehend Hebrew, moreover, leads directly to a scribal act: the copying and studying of the sacred written traditions of one's ancestors. In *Jubilees*, Babel serves not as an etiological narrative for the plurality of languages (or even for the diversification of peoples into nations), but as an account of the obliteration of knowledge of the language of revelation before its gracious restoration to the progenitor of the children of Israel. This has a direct bearing on the author's understanding of Israel's relationship to the other nations. The Jubilean Babel highlights both the superior linguistic status of Israel as well as the revelatory marginalization of the other nations who lose the ability to speak and read Hebrew.

How does *Jubilees'* unique focus on the language of creation and its connection to written traditions produce a valid translation of Babel which speaks to the concerns of the author and potential audience of the work? I would suggest that the translated version of Babel serves as an object lesson to assimilationist Judaism during the early Hellenistic period. The impulse to integrate with their non-Jewish neighbors and the concomitant loss of knowledge of the ancestral traditions—embodied most clearly in the Hebrew language—is presented through the matrix of the narrative of Babel. The sons of Noah fail to separate and occupy their divinely established places—such mixing results in a loss of the knowledge of sacred tradition. It is only divine grace given to Abram that returns knowledge of Hebrew and thus admission to the sacred chain of tradition. The nations, as such, are excised and blocked from this sort of knowledge. Such a valorization of the Hebrew language and its superiority with regard to the transmission of sacred knowledge is consistent with what Seth Schwartz has termed the “comodification” of Hebrew during the Hellenistic period.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ There is some unevenness in *Jubilees'* presentation of the disappearance of Hebrew following the Babel incident. Terah is said to teach his son Abram the ability to write before the revelation of Hebrew to Abram. The author suggests that Abram learns writing just prior to his initial rejection of his father's idolatrous practices. “The child [Abram] began to realize the errors of the earth—that everyone was going astray after the statues and after impurity. His father taught him (the art of) writing. When he was two weeks of year [= 14 years], he separated from his father in order not to worship idols with him” (*Jub.* 11:16). There is no indication of the language utilized by Terah in teaching Abram how to write. Neither is there any mention of a collection of sacred ancestral texts at this point. For my purposes, I would highlight that *rejection of idolatry does not appear to be sufficient* cause for the re-instatement of Hebrew.

⁵⁷ Schwartz, “Language,” 4.

Schwartz divides the history of the Hebrew language in antiquity into three periods. In the first period, Hebrew is simply the language spoken by the masses of ancient Israel and there is no self-conscious discussion of its importance retained in the Hebrew Bible. The rise of Aramaic and the Hellenization of the eastern Mediterranean change matters significantly. The second period begins (roughly) with the return from Babylonian exile.⁵⁸

From 300 BCE to 70 CE, Hebrew was no longer commonly spoken, having been replaced by Aramaic. Hebrew, however, remained important because it was still the language of the Jerusalem temple and the Pentateuch ... these institutions gradually became the central symbols of Jewish corporate identity ... since curatorship of the Torah was in theory open to all males, mastery of Hebrew was also a path to prestige, and study of it was widespread in certain circles. In this second stage then, Hebrew, no longer commonly spoken, became a *commodity*, consciously manipulated by the leaders of the Jews to evoke the Jews' distinction from their neighbors ...⁵⁹

Knowledge of the Hebrew language became a means of marking identity in a quickly changing world, a means of asserting superiority and even divine election. Rubin stresses that:

It is no accident that the question of the primordial language came up exactly at this time, when a new concept of national identity was being formed. A distinctive language is a clear expression of a unique and separate cultural identity. During the early Hasmonean period the notion that the Jews are a separate nation with its own religion, culture, customs and land was developed. It is thus clear that language—the main vehicle of expression—should also be unique and serve as an organ of this national culture and identity.⁶⁰

Schwartz adds that:

it is precisely from the third century BCE onwards that the Hebrew language began to be ideologized, so that its use was no longer a matter of indifference, but came to acquire symbolic weight and social importance.⁶¹

This ideological function was first clearly used by the governing Hasmonean dynasty. In time, however, as the leadership class itself sought admission to the upper echelons of Hellenistic society, an insistence on Hebrew became

⁵⁸ The third period which Schwartz treats details Hebrew in the post-destruction and early rabbinic period.

⁵⁹ Schwartz, "Language," 3–4.

⁶⁰ Rubin, "Language of Creation," 313; for a longer discussion of the ideological usages of Hebrew in the Second Temple period, see David Goodblatt, *Elements of Ancient Jewish Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 49–70.

⁶¹ Schwartz, "Language," 18.

a way of asserting traditional and conservative understandings of how Israel was to relate to the nations around them. Whereas Rubin presents the focus on Hebrew as primordial language as a result of cultural polemic in support of the superiority of Jewish identity (which she treats monolithically) in contrast to the dominant Hellenistic culture, she fails to take account of other debates taking place in *intra*-Jewish circles at precisely the same time.

The ideological usage of Hebrew only increased in the decades following the composition of *Jubilees*. It is not to be missed that the sectarian literature found at Qumran (a key readership for *Jubilees*⁶²) is largely composed in a distinctive style of Hebrew, which for lack of a better term, is called Qumran Hebrew. William Schniedewind has suggested that this 'version' of Hebrew served the Qumran sectarians as an *anti-language*. He states:

the complex character of QH can be appreciated only by reference to its social function within the Qumran community. This small, isolated religious community on the north shore of the Dead Sea used language ideologically as a means of differentiating and further insulating themselves.⁶³

Schniedewind goes on to argue that the use of Qumran Hebrew was precisely to separate the sectarians from *other Jews who also spoke and wrote some form of Hebrew*. It is precisely during this period of intense debate surrounding Jewish identity that *Jubilees* rewrites the narrative of Babel to demonstrate the dangers inherent in failing to occupy one's place—politically, geographically and linguistically—in the divine order. One might even loose the language of revelation and “when a language dies, a possible world dies with it.”⁶⁴

5. Conclusion

Schwartz points to our passage from the book of *Jubilees* as an example of “the function of Hebrew in the ideology of the curatorial class.” My own inclination is to see the rewritten narrative of Babel as much more than

⁶² Segal notes that “the precise relationship between the sectarian literature and *Jubilees* has yet to be defined precisely, but the similarities between them inform us that they both emerged from the same spiritual and religious milieu. The study of each one therefore complements the other” (Segal, *The Book of Jubilees*, 1).

⁶³ William M. Schniedewind, “Qumran Hebrew as an Anti-Language,” *JBL* 118 (1999): 235; see also Steven Weitzman, “Why Did the Qumran Community Write in Hebrew,” *JAOS* 119 (1999) 35–45.

⁶⁴ It is ironic that a work so concerned with the revelatory power of Hebrew and its ability to define Jewish identity was to be preserved in its totality only in another language by adherents of another religious tradition.

a claim for the symbolic importance of Hebrew. It is, rather, a witness to the fact that the author of *Jubilees* saw the people of Israel re-living the events of Babel. He calls on them to join their ancestor Abram in rejecting the pagan religious practices of the neighbors—exemplified here by ‘pagan’ obsession with the observation of the stars. One of the most external marks of this construction of Jewishness would have been a return to the pure and uncorrupted language of Hebrew, the language inscribed upon the eternal heavenly tablets, the language of the Torah and Covenant and the once and future language of the *true* Jew. The knowledge of Hebrew—the ability to read the sacred prelapsarian tongue—enabled primordial secrets to be communicated only to Abram and his descendants. The confusion of tongues, far from a simple punishment for the hubris of humanity, is about the separation of the nations of the world from the knowledge which is only possessed by the elite scribal class of Israel, an elite class responsible for the composition and the communication of the book of *Jubilees*. The rewritten Babel of *Jubilees* offers a clear attempt to marshal exegetical arguments in defense of a translation of the tower narrative. The author of *Jubilees* wishes the message of Babel to apply and have relevance to the concerns and challenges of his own day. The hegemonic practices of the builders on the plain of Shinar was seen in the spread of Hellenization and the allures of one civilization in the days of the author of *Jubilees*. The judgment of God was already known.

CHAPTER FOUR

PSEUDO-PHILO'S *BIBLICAL ANTIQUITIES*: ECHOES OF THE TOWER

As every generation retranslates the classics, out of a vital compulsion for immediacy and a precise echo, so every generation uses language to build its own resonant past.¹

1. *Introduction*

The Tower of Babel, the final narrative of the Primeval History, possesses an ambiguous relationship to the central story of the origin of Israel that follows with the call of Abram in Gen 12. Babel signifies the last act of unified humanity prior to the advent of the people of Israel. The previous chapter examined how a concern with language and the generational transfer of sacred knowledge was an important focus for the rewriting of the Babel account in *Jubilees*. Babel served as a line of demarcation between humanity and the people of Israel; Israel was born (or reborn) with the restoration of the sacred language to Abram. The author of another Second Temple work, however, translates the tower to bring about a *greater connection* between the Babelites and the ancestor of Israel. Such translation is accomplished by rewriting the account of Babel in light of narratives known from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. A primordial conflict on the plain of Shinar is used as a means of reflection on the very nature of authentic obedience to the will of Yahweh, particularly in times of political and religious repression. The ancestor and epitome of Israel, Abram, is refined in the furnace-fires of Babel and found to be obedient. In the process, the narrative of Babel is translated into another historical context to answer the concerns and questions of an Israel, who, much like the Babelites, are under increasing threat of dispersion and destruction.

¹ George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language & Translation* (3d. ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 30.

2. *Pseudo-Philo: Scripture Shaping Scripture*

The *Biblical Antiquities* (henceforth *L.A.B.*) of Pseudo-Philo is a retelling of the Hebrew Bible from the time of creation up until the death of King Saul.² While originally composed in Hebrew, the text survives only in what many argue is a Latin translation of a Greek translation of the Hebrew.³ The work is highly selective in its rewriting of the biblical materials as entire portions of the scriptural narrative are summarized in very few words, while other narratives are greatly expanded. This selective re-presentation generally has a great deal to do with those themes and issues which are of significance to Pseudo-Philo.⁴ The text's special attention to the biblical book of Judges is noteworthy. The entire ancestral narrative (Gen 12–50) is summarized in one chapter (*L.A.B.* 8), while Pseudo-Philo spends some twenty-four chapters (*L.A.B.* 25–49) recounting and embellishing the book of Judges. Such a choice has a great deal to do with Pseudo-Philo's interest in the question of leadership and its importance for the political well-being of the Jewish people.

This focus on proper leadership has often been tied to speculation about the political and historical context in which the work was written. While there is no firm consensus concerning the date of the composition of the work, the purported absence of discussion dealing with the destruction of the Jerusalem temple is often *the* chronological yardstick by which the work is dated. Fisk claims that “in light of the preoccupation with the loss of the Temple in both *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*, the absence of clear references to the destruction is telling.”⁵ There is, simultaneously, a strong focus on

² The abbreviation derives from the traditional Latin title of the work, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*. It is curious that anyone familiar with the works of Philo of Alexandria would have mistaken *L.A.B.* as a work of Philo's. The association seems to have arisen from the fact that *L.A.B.* was often transmitted with the works of Philo (for reasons unknown) in early Christian circles. See Howard Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum: With Latin Text and English Translation* (AGJU 31; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 195–199.

³ The detailed work on the original language of *Biblical Antiquities* has been done by Daniel J. Harrington, *Text and Biblical Text in Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969); idem., “The Original Language of Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*,” *HTR* 63 (1970): 503–514; idem., “The Biblical Text of Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*,” *CBQ* 33 (1971): 1–17.

⁴ For a comprehensive discussion of themes in Pseudo-Philo, see Frederick J. Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 223–261. See also, Howard Jacobson, “Biblical Interpretation in Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*,” in *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 180–199.

⁵ Bruce N. Fisk, *Do You Not Remember?: Scripture, Story and Exegesis in the Rewritten Bible*

how to deal faithfully with external oppression. The tension suggests that Pseudo-Philo was likely active during the final years before the destruction of the temple. Nickelsburg expands the criteria for dating.

A date before 100 CE is indicated by the type of biblical text that the author employs, a text type that fell out of use around the turn of the century under the influence of the rabbis. A date close to the year 70 is suggested by the many close and substantial parallels with the wording and eschatological traditions in the 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra and with traditions in the Antiquities of Josephus. Moreover, the crisis in leadership that is reflected in the book can be identified with events in the decades before 70 CE, and the concern with leadership is paralleled in 2 Baruch. Those who prefer a pre-70 date argue that the book seems to take the existence of the Jerusalem cult for granted and makes no explicit reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple.⁶

Given the extreme religious and cultural dislocation associated with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, it is reasonable to expect that such trauma would be reflected in literature produced following the destruction. Such is not the case with regard to *L.A.B.* Put simply, the work reads as a text which is rewriting biblical narrative in an attempt to *persuade* its audience to adopt a course of action, not to *console* them.

Previous scholarship often looked to *L.A.B.* as a repository of early Jewish exegetical traditions—and with good reason. There are numerous cases where exegetical traditions known from later rabbinic texts make their ‘debut’ in the writing of Pseudo-Philo.⁷ Indeed, some scholars have made the move from similar exegetical traditions to genealogical assertions concerning Pseudo-Philo, earlier Jewish, and later rabbinic texts. The temptation to engage in exegetical excavation is quite strong when reading this text. It is still not uncommon to hear *L.A.B.* referred to as “midrashic” in the secondary literature.⁸ Even those who are cautious about using the term midrash in relation to a text like *L.A.B.* still see some value in comparing exegetical traditions found in Pseudo-Philo with later midrashic traditions.

of *Pseudo-Philo* (JSPSup 37; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 34. Murphy provides a brief overview of the various options for dating the work with regard to the temple in Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo*, 6.

⁶ George W.E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah* (2d. ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 269.

⁷ Fisk claims that “a century ago, Cohn described LAB as a form of ‘Haggadic commentary’ and emphasized its ‘Midrashic character’” (Fisk, *Do You Not Remember*, 25). He also points out that the connection between *L.A.B.* and later midrashic tradition was already noticed by the medieval Jewish-Italian scholar, Azariah de Rossi (25, n. 1).

⁸ R. Bauckham, “The Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum of Pseudo-Philo and the Gospels as ‘Midrash,’” in *Gospel Perspectives III: Studies in Midrash and Historiography* (ed. R.T. France and D. Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 33–76.

By tracing a trajectory of aggadic traditions, beginning with their origins in post-exilic biblical literature, and culminating in later, aggadic midrashim, it is possible to locate many of Ps-Philo's embellishments and to show how they are frequently rooted in traditional ways of reading the Old Testament.⁹

The author is seen to stand in a long line of interpretive tradition. The oft unspoken corollary is that he is not an exegetical innovator. Indeed, Howard Jacobson, pointing to Pseudo-Philo's exegetical predecessors has come close to denying the author any real creativity whatsoever:

To be sure, there can be no question that the work as we have it is the product of one mind, one shaping spirit. Yet, the contents of the book are so largely derivative that one tends to think of the author as the person who gave this work form rather than substance. Not only is the biblical narrative the foundation of the whole book, but even the deviations and embellishments, it is reasonable to assume, are in some measure a product of a tradition that anteceded our author.¹⁰

Such a view does not take seriously enough the hermeneutical implications of re-arranging and re-ordering biblical materials in the production of a rewritten Bible. Jacobson's approach does not grasp the significant movement of Pseudo-Philo's rewritten Babel. By means of shifting the ordering of Scripture, the various elements of the tradition are radically translated in *content* while remaining in a recognizable and traditional 'biblical' form. A new message can indeed be easily poured into old wineskins.

Recent studies have, in fact, focused sustained attention on the hermeneutical style of the author of *L.A.B.* One of the most obvious hermeneutical moves made by the author is to rewrite biblical narratives on the basis of narratives known elsewhere from the Hebrew Bible. Individual narratives of the Hebrew Bible are interpreted in light of theological realities known elsewhere in Scripture. Jacobson has articulated the matter thusly:

LAB routinely contains themes, language, and elements of plot that are not present in the corresponding biblical narrative, but which he has borrowed from 'analogous' biblical contexts.¹¹

One central question for our study is determining *which texts* Pseudo-Philo encountered as analogous to the Tower of Babel and, just as importantly, why he encountered such texts as analogous. Another recent interpreter of *L.A.B.*, Bruce Fisk, has demonstrated at length that Pseudo-Philo is a master

⁹ Fisk, *Do You Not Remember*, 26.

¹⁰ Jacobson, *Commentary*, 195.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

of the citation of what he terms "secondary-scripture."¹² For Pseudo-Philo, Scripture is apparently its own best interpreter. Jacobson has underscored that:

the way LAB creates, adapts, integrates and interweaves on the basis of his profound familiarity with the biblical text and his willingness to mine it like a quarry is the predominant tool in his narrative-kit.¹³

While the author certainly draws on pre-existing "exegetical motifs" (to return to the terminology of Kugel), he does so with purpose and larger theological goals in mind. The conflation of biblical narratives and the citation of secondary scriptures is the exegetical method employed to relate the essential theological concerns of Pseudo-Philo. Whoever his interpretive forebears and whatever the fate of the exegetical traditions contained in his work, the hermeneutical and exegetical particularity of the author are important. It is useful to isolate the scriptural quotations and echoes¹⁴ present in Pseudo-Philo's rewriting of the Babel narrative and to demonstrate that they are traditional interpretive moves, but any interpretation of Pseudo-Philo as 'translation' will need also to explain the reason for their presence in the larger work. How is a narrative like the account of the Tower of Babel being transformed by its conflation with other narratives from the Hebrew Bible? What purpose is served by the citation of secondary scriptures? Steve Weitzman has opined that:

it is only quite recently ... that students of early postbiblical literature have begun to think systematically about how this literature uses biblical elements for aesthetic or rhetorical purposes.¹⁵

The question is finally one of taking the individual work at hand as a serious attempt at the transformation and translation of the biblical narrative.

In contrast to his presentation of a number of other biblical narratives, Pseudo-Philo spends a great deal of exegetical energy in his recounting Gen 11. This explosion of aggadah with regard to the tower builders is due

¹² B.N. Fisk, "Offering Isaac Again and Again: Pseudo-Philo's Use of the Aqedah as Inter-text," *CBQ* 62 (2000): 481–507; idem, "Scripture Shaping Scripture: The Interpretive Role of Biblical Citations in Pseudo-Philo's Episode of the Golden Calf," *JSP* 17 (1998): 3–23. See especially the published version of Fisk's Duke University dissertation, *Do You Not Remember?*

¹³ Jacobson, *Commentary*, 233.

¹⁴ The language of scriptural echoes is associated with the work of Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). Fisk's own dissertation was written under Hays' direction at Duke University and draws heavily from the hermeneutical implications of Hays' monograph.

¹⁵ Steve Weitzman, "Allusion, Artifice, and Exile in the Hymn of Tobit," *JBL* 115 (1996): 49.

primarily to a concern to integrate the figure of Abram into the Babel narrative.¹⁶ It is widely held that Pseudo-Philo contains two separate traditions concerning the builders of Babel (one in *L.A.B.* 6 and the other in *L.A.B.* 7). While there are two traditions present, “LAB has sought to weave them together in one fabric, as if they were two parts of one tale.”¹⁷ Murphy asserts that these two traditions are reflective of different methods of rewriting. One approach, characteristic of *L.A.B.* 6, utilizes biblical citation as a pre-text for the composition of a larger narrative. These are passages which “quote the Bible to set up the situation ... or to constitute the structure of an incident.” In these cases, “there is extensive rewriting, often with the addition of lengthy passages which do not appear in the Bible.”¹⁸ A second approach, more characteristic of *L.A.B.* 7, “depend heavily upon quotations of biblical passages [and] small scale changes in the text.”¹⁹ The focus of the following will be on Pseudo-Philo’s presentation of the narrative of Babel as a central element of his account of the Abram narrative (i.e., *L.A.B.* 6).²⁰ As such, the tower narrative appears almost as a pre-text which has been transformed into the story of the birth of the people of Israel—certainly an issue which might require an additional amount of narration on the part of Pseudo-Philo. In contrast to Murphy’s overly sharp distinction between these two types of rewriting, however, I will also argue that *L.A.B.* 6 is carrying out a quiet dialogue with and interpretation of biblical material in Gen 11 as well.

The birth of Israel takes place in a violent break with the rest of humanity; Israel is born of conflict and persecution in Pseudo-Philo. Such conflict, furthermore, provides the occasion for a discussion of leadership. Others have pointed to Pseudo-Philo’s obsession with the difference between *good* and *bad* leaders.²¹ The narrative of Babel is utilized by Pseudo-Philo to reflect on the distinction between these two types of leaders, and the *ambiguous space in between* a good and a bad leader. The account, in connection to the issue of leadership, additionally highlights the difficulty of determining the will of the divine in moments of religious repression. The risk of trusting in a rational (even, as we will see, a biblical-sounding) course of action

¹⁶ For the sake of consistency, I will refer to Abram, not Abraham, throughout.

¹⁷ Jacobson, *Commentary*, 373.

¹⁸ Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo*, 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ The material contained in *L.A.B.* 7 will be discussed more briefly in Chapter Six, below.

²¹ Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo*, 233–241; George W.E. Nickelsburg, “Good and Bad Leaders in Pseudo-Philo’s *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*,” in *Ideal Figured in Ancient Judaism: Profiles and Paradigms* (ed. George W.E. Nickelsburg and John J. Collins; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1980), 49–65.

which is not part of the divine plan is always present.²² In what follows, I will first provide a literary reading of the Babel narrative according to Pseudo-Philo—listening especially for scriptural echoes.²³ I will also explore what message is being conveyed by Pseudo-Philo's presentation of Abram at Babel and why Pseudo-Philo is alone in Jewish antiquity in connecting the call of Abram to his role in the affair on the plain of Shinar.²⁴ The discussion will progress by exploring the characterization and motivation of *three main figures* in the rewritten narrative: the Babelites; one of Abram's kinsmen, Joktan; and Abram himself. I will finally suggest how these characters and discussions of their various motivations might contribute to Pseudo-Philo's translational activity in light of the commonly suggested historical context in which Pseudo-Philo was likely produced.

3. *Before Babel: The Problem of Babelian Unity in Pseudo-Philo*

Pseudo-Philo opens his account of the building of Babel in a way that adheres closely to the underlying biblical text, but weaves additional material between the lines.

Then all those who had been separated while inhabiting the earth afterwards gathered and dwelled together. Setting out from the east, they found a plain in the land of Babylon. They dwelled there and said to each other, "Behold it will come about that we will be scattered from each other and in later times we will be fighting each other. Therefore, come now, let us build for ourselves a tower whose top will reach the heavens, and we will make for ourselves a name and a glory upon the earth."²⁵ (L.A.B. 6:1)

²² Murphy has argued that the ability of characters to act in consonance with the Divine Plan is a key element in the narrative form of Pseudo-Philo; see Frederick J. Murphy, "Divine Plan, Human Plan: A Structuring Theme in Pseudo-Philo," *JQR* 77 (1986): 5–14.

²³ I follow here the approach adopted by Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo*, 9–25. Reading the work as a literary whole, furthermore, is consistent with my own concern for seeing Pseudo-Philo as a genuine attempt at 'translating' the biblical narrative.

²⁴ There are references to Abram in connection to the Tower of Babel in later rabbinic and medieval sources (*Pirke R. El.* 24; *b. Abod. Zar.* 19a; Ibn Ezra). For a brief discussion, see Jacobson, *Commentary*, 373. There is one potential reference to Abram's connection to the Tower of Babel in the Second Temple work known as the *Wisdom of Solomon*. The text reads: "Wisdom also, when the nations in wicked agreement had been put to confusion, recognized the righteous man and preserved him blameless before God, and kept him strong in the face of his compassion for his child" (*Wis* 10:5). As this passage covers the entire scope of the Abrahamic narratives in Genesis, it is difficult to determine whether or not the author is implying that Abram was actually present during the actions of the Babelites.

²⁵ All translations from Pseudo-Philo will follow the critical translation of Jacobson.

The builders possess knowledge of what is going to take place in the future. This knowledge is in contrast to the biblical narrative where the Babelites construct a tower and city in order to avoid *potential* scattering.²⁶ The builders in Pseudo-Philo are quite clear that “we will be scattered from each other.” Their prescience is extended, however, to include a foreshadowing of future enmity. The relationship between the construction of the tower and future scattering and hostilities is not clear, for there is no sense that the act of building the tower will alter the future in any significant way. At best it may allow for the creation of a monument which will attest to the fame of this earlier generation. Later generations may look upon the grandiose achievements of those who went before them and, perhaps, have a sign of what once was possible. In this sense, the builders may have desired that the tower serve as an image of hope and reconciliation in a world overtaken by war and conflict.

The characterization of the Babelites in Pseudo-Philo is informed by the preceding chapter, *L.A.B.* 5. Pseudo-Philo begins his narration of the building of the tower with a notice about the state of humanity prior to the construction project as we are told that “all those who had been separated while inhabiting the earth afterwards gathered together and dwelled together.” The notice may appear a rather simplistic attempt to reconcile the contradiction produced by the juxtaposition of Gen 10 and its notice of the spread of the sons of Noah across the inhabited earth and the concomitant production of various languages with the presentation of humanity dwelling together in linguistic unity in Gen 11. There is, however, a great deal more taking place. *Biblical Antiquities* 5 contains an account of the census of Noah’s descendants.²⁷ Each group of the descendants of the sons of Noah—Ham, Japheth and Shem—select a leader. The Hamites chose Nimrod as their leader, Fenech assumes the leadership of the Japhites, and Joktan serves as captain of the Shemites. The remainder of the chapter narrates a rather banal account of the census of the various groups. Pseudo-Philo tells us that

when these three came together, they decided to review and count the people who were kin to them. And so, while Noah was still alive, all assembled and lived together, and the earth was still at peace. (*L.A.B.* 5:2)

²⁶ See Chapter One, above, for a discussion of the Hebrew term *יָצָא*.

²⁷ Jacobson correctly suggests that “the interposition here, between the account of the three Noachite families and the story of the tower of Babel, of a census of all the families, is purposeful. LAB represents three leaders as gathering all the peoples together for the purpose of the census, whereupon they all remained together and lived in peace” (Jacobson, *Commentary*, 347–348).

The notice is foreboding. Are we to expect that the people will not remain at peace once the patriarch Noah passes from the scene?²⁸ The specter of conflict—in this case interfamilial-as-international conflict—is raised by this simple notice. The possibility of conflict is made explicit in the conclusion to each counting: “The total of the camp of the sons of Japheth, all men of might and all equipped with arms for battle before their leaders” (5:4); “The total of the sons of Ham, all men of valor and equipped with battle gear before the leaders” (5:5); “the total of the camp of the sons of Shem ... all were capable of engaging in battle and were equipped for war in the presence of their captains” (5:6). Why count the number of men available for war in a time of universal and primordial peace? Murphy underscores that “the census has a distinctly military tone.”²⁹ The remainder of the chapter lists—in minute detail—the census of the three groups.

The author of *L.A.B.* is not merely creating a narrative out of whole cloth with his long lists of the descendents of the sons of Noah—complete with precise numbers. He is clearly working with a biblical model. As we have noted, it is one of the hallmarks of Pseudo-Philo's approach to the rewriting of biblical material that he utilizes biblical material in his interpretation of biblical narrative. The book of Numbers provides us with his template for a primeval census. The author has copied this biblical form in his prologue to the Babel narrative. In the process, however, he has also evoked a larger canonical conversation. A census can serve many functions in a society—whether ancient or modern. The book of Samuel contains a less than positive understanding of a census conducted in the time of David. Second Samuel 24 attributes a census of Israel performed towards the end of David's reign to the anger of Yahweh. The result of the census was divine chastisement through a plague. This census became so problematic in the Israelite imagination that a later author attributed the instigation of the census, not to God via David, but to Satan (1 Chron 21:1–7). The narration of a census as prelude to the building of the tower, therefore, has an importance that is belied by its prosaic presentation in *L.A.B.* 5. “Although the text does not record a negative reaction to the census,” claims Murphy, “numbering

²⁸ The belief that the peace of the people is dependent upon the leadership of Noah is akin to the narrative pattern found in the book of Judges. So long as the judge is alive, Israel prospers and does not fall into false worship. Once a leader has passed from the scene, however, the people engage in false worship and suffer oppression by their adversaries. Given Pseudo-Philo's interest in the period of the Judges, it is not surprising to see this pattern appear.

²⁹ Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo*, 40.

people implies authority over them and should be undertaken only with God's approval." He further asserts that "the taking of a census ... shows the ambiguity of humanity's relationship with God at this point."³⁰ Christoph Uehlinger is equally blunt when he claims that "the militaristic logic of the census is obvious."³¹ The people are already preparing for conflict with one another before the building of the tower. This preparation goes directly to the question of the people's motivation for building the tower.

The motif of anticipated future hostilities between the descendants of the sons of Noah is a curious addition to the Babel narrative. It is certainly connected to the biblical assertion that the Babelites' desire to build a city and tower is related to their fear of being scattered across the entire earth. Pseudo-Philo, however, takes that foundation and builds upon it. The people are fearful of dispersion, to be sure, but they also anticipate warfare which will occur amongst them once such a situation has occurred. The construction of the tower is, therefore, simultaneously about the construction of community (a positive value), the need for all members of the kinship group to work together as one, and the animosity and hatred directed at those few members who refuse to submit to the demands of the majority. There is additionally, from a canonical perspective, a curious form of logic taking place here. According to Gen 13:7 ff., separation is the solution proposed by Abram to his nephew Lot in an attempt to reduce potential conflict between the herders of the two men. Abram says:

Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Let us separate (לֵאמֹר הָאֵלֹהִים לְפָנֶיךָ הַפָּרֶד נָא). (Gen 13:8–9)

Separation, in other words, is the antidote to conflict (good fences make good neighbors); it is precisely the opposite of what the Babelites do in Pseudo-Philo. Faced with the fear of future conflict, the descendants of Noah take the worst possible course of action—they choose to stay together in one location. Another way to focus the nature of Pseudo-Philo's rewriting of Babel is to ask a simple question: Why is the formation of community and a desire to remain at peace with one's neighbors—seeming a positive goal—treated so negatively, indeed as a primordial sin, in Pseudo-Philo? Paradoxically, the drive for unity and community will become the catalyst

³⁰ Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo*, 40.

³¹ C. Uehlinger, *Weltreich und 'eine Rede': Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerszählung (Gen 11, 1–9)* (OBO 101; Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 117.

for incivility and repression at Babel. The desire for an uncivil peace may also point us towards the historical horizon against which Pseudo-Philo's translation of the tower should be read.

4. *Ambiguity and Idolatry*

The goal of unity takes on a specific form in Pseudo-Philo's narrative. The account continues with a mixture of biblical text and interpretive expansion.

6:2 They said to each other, "Let us take bricks and let each of us write our names on the bricks and burn them with fire; and what will be burned will serve as mortar and brick." 6:3 They each took their own bricks, aside from twelve men who refused to take them. These are their names: Abram, Nahor, Lot, Ruge, Tenute, Zaba, Armodat, Jobab, Esar, Abimahel, Saba, Aufin. 6:4 The people of that land seized them and brought them to their chiefs and said, "These are the men who have violated our plans and refuse to walk in our ways." The leader said to them, "Why were you not willing, every one of you, to contribute bricks together with the people of the land?" Those men answered and said, "We are not contributing bricks with you, nor are we joining in your wishes. We know only the Lord, and him we worship. Even if you throw us into the fire and bricks, we will not assent to you." (L.A.B. 6:2–4)

The majority of the rewriting of Gen 11 in *L.A.B.* is taken up with the narration of Abram's refusal (along with eleven cohorts) to join the people in building the tower and the subsequent debate about the fate of the dissenters. Abram's contumacious contingent is portrayed as a primeval pattern of Israel. As punishment for such intransigence, the people and their leaders determine to cast Abram and the eleven others into the furnace which had been prepared for firing the bricks.³² There are a number of possible rationales for the importation of the 'threat of incineration' motif into the Babel account. Such rewriting most directly draws on plot elements from the third chapter of the book of Daniel, but the narrative as a whole is stepped in biblical language and relates to other biblical texts in numerous ways. This conforms to the previously mentioned hermeneutical strategy employed by Pseudo-Philo of rewriting a biblical narrative in light of narratives known elsewhere. The following explores the manner in which Babel,

³² It is interesting that the whole notion of *casting into the fire*, according to the narrative of Pseudo-Philo, arises out of the dissenters' rejection of the offer to inscribe bricks. The dozen not only refuse, they also suggest the means of their own potential demise: "even if you throw us into the fire and bricks, we will not assent to you."

in Pseudo-Philo, intersects in important interpretive ways with the larger canon of the Hebrew Bible.

Why does Pseudo-Philo model his rewritten version of Babel on the narrative pattern of Dan 3 and what is the resulting message of such a hermeneutical refraction of the two narratives? One basic (and rather banal) reason for the “analogical correlation” between Gen 11 and Dan 3 might be geography.³³ Both stories take place in the territory of Babylon. The Daniel narrative opens, in fact, with an explicit reference to the location of the golden statue erected by King Nebuchadnezzar. The conflict begins when the king “set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon” (בְּבִקְעַת דּוּרָא בְּמִדְיָנִת) (בְּבִל) (Dan 3:1). Either Babylon or the reference to a plain (the same term in Aramaic and Hebrew)—or likely both—could serve as signals for early Jewish interpreters to make connections between the later day account of the three youths and the primeval apostasy on the plain of Shinar. In addition, the text of Daniel mentions *linguistic diversity* in the call to worship contained in Dan 3:4: “You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages ...” (Dan 3:4). The purpose of the command to prostrate in Daniel is clear: all peoples, regardless of national, ethnic or linguistic difference are to obey Nebuchadnezzar and submit to his authority. All of the world must be unified—just as it was at the beginning of Gen 11. Without tying the narrative of Pseudo-Philo to a particular historical context, it is likely that one potential function of yoking these two stories is the presentation of a consistent view of how history unfolds which encourages greater discernment of the activity of the God of Israel in that history. Murphy says that Pseudo-Philo “frequently compares one event in the narrative to an earlier event, implying that such analogies reveal history’s true meaning.”³⁴ In the midst of crisis and the disintegration of traditional structures of meaning, the suggestion that history is consistent and divinely guided would be a source of strength and courage. The connection of these two narratives would allow for reading the Tower of Babel as a narrative of idolatry and an attempt by the nations to impose idolatry and hegemonic religious practice upon the righteous minority. Just as Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar persecuted the

³³ I borrow the language of analogical correlation from Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 421–422. Fishbane highlights the effect of analogous correlation by asserting that “while the ‘first’ event or topos is paradigmatic and essential for the correlation which is aggadically intuited or projected, the ‘later’ analogue is the moment or figure of exegetical and existential significance—and so it functionally eclipses or absorbs its prototype” (Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 422).

³⁴ Frederick Murphy, “The Martial Option in Pseudo-Philo,” *CBQ* 57 (1998): 676.

righteous Jew and tried to force conformity of worship, such also was the case during the earliest period of Israelite history. The ambiguous biblical narrative of Babel is absorbed and 'functionally eclipsed' by the later narrative of Dan 3. The issue of idolatry is easily inserted where it did not exist before. Idolatry, however, is not explicit in Pseudo-Philo; it is only implied by an analogous biblical narrative.

There were also elements present in the Abram material in Genesis that could cause early Jewish interpreters to connect the experiences of Abram with those found in Dan 3.³⁵ The account of Abram and the furnace should sound familiar to anyone knowledgeable of early Jewish and rabbinic traditions concerning Abram. *Abram and the Fiery Furnace*³⁶ is a classic tale found in a number of ancient Jewish texts.³⁷ The story can be broadly summarized: Abram, convinced of the futility of worshipping idols made with human hands, smashes all but one of the idols in his father Terah's idol-manufacturing workshop. When questioned about his actions, Abram claims that the remaining idol is responsible for the carnage. Tricked into confessing that such a scenario is impossible and angered by his son's actions, Terah delivers Abram to the wicked King Nimrod who punishes Abram by casting him into the fire. Abram is miraculously saved. (The brother of Abram, Haran, is also present as an indecisive by-stander in a number of incarnations of the tradition. He is portrayed as uncertain with regard to taking sides for or against his brother and actually perishes in the furnace prepared for Abram because of his timidity.) It is commonly held that the larger complex originated through an interpretation of Gen 11:28 and 15:7.³⁸ Both texts make reference to Ur of the Chaldeans. In the later text, God claims to have brought Abram out "from Ur of the Chaldeans." The

³⁵ The elements native to the text of Genesis arguably would have had a stronger influence on the exegetical construction of the account of Abram and the furnace.

³⁶ Geza Vermes wrote two very influential articles in connection to ancient traditions concerning Abraham. See his "Life of Abraham, One," and "Life of Abraham, Two," in *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (2d. ed.; StPB 4; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973), 67–126. Vermes' work was pioneering in tracing exegetical development. He begins with a medieval work, *Sefer ha-Yashar*, and works his way back to the earlier rabbinic and Second Temple sources. He states that "I propose to trace the history of the major midrashic themes in the Yashar story, and to enquire into the motives, exegetical or doctrinal, which originally prompted interpreters to develop, and even to supplant, the biblical narrative" (Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 68).

³⁷ *Gen. Rab.*, 38:13; *b. B.Bat.* 91a; *Midr. Ps.* 118:9; *Jub.* 12 and 13; sources drawn from Charles Perrott and Pierre-Maurice Bogaert, *Pseudo-Philon: Les Antiquités Bibliques. Vol. 2, Introduction Littéraire, Commentaire et Index* (SC 230; Paris: Cerf, 1976), 96–97.

³⁸ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 143–144.

Hebrew for “from Ur of the Chaldeans” (מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים), can also be read as “from the fire of the Chaldeans.” The passage is then treated as a biblical reference to an un-narrated event in the life of Abram. (The former passage, Gen 11:28, claims that Haran died, בְּאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים. Once again, the biblical text appears to allude to an unknown event in the life of Abram.) On its face, the account of Abram and the Fiery Furnace contained in *L.A.B* 6 appears to be very similar to much of the general outline of the traditional tale. There are some rather significant differences, however. The central element of the traditional narrative of Abram and the Fiery Furnace has idolatry and familial conflict as a central element, but makes no mention of the building of the Tower of Babel. Because of the similarities, many interpreters have been content to see here a variation on an exegetical theme. The narrative context of Abram’s encounter with the furnace may be different than it is in other texts, but the basic message is identical. Abram’s refusal to join humanity in constructing the Tower of Babel is theologically analogous to his smashing of his father’s idols. Both acts are a renunciation of idolatry, only the physical expression of the theological conviction is different. Abram usually smashed idols. In Pseudo-Philo, Abram refused to join in a questionable public works project. Given that other Jewish interpretive texts from roughly the same time period portray Babel as a story of idolatry, the equation seems rather unproblematic. It is also not difficult to explain why and how Abram was incorporated into the narrative of Babel. It is common practice for early Jewish authors to interpret contiguous narratives as being substantively related.

Vermes also points to elements of the Babel narrative that might have attracted Abram and the Furnace. “Taking into account the biblical context as a whole,” Vermes states:

the legend of the fiery furnace establishes a definitive link between the brick kiln used for the baking of the materials needed in the construction of the Tower of Babel, the deliverance of Abraham by God (Gen xv), and his flight abroad.³⁹

I would add one additional line of evidence for explaining the inclusion of a narrative about a fiery furnace in the rewritten account of Babel—the words of Gen 11:3. The Babelites inaugurate their building project with the words “Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard” (הָבָה נִלְבְּנָה לִבְנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה) (לְשִׂרְפָה). The text is potentially repetitive. An early interpreter might have

³⁹ Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 89.

experienced the call to make *and* burn bricks as redundant. The additional fact that the verbs for “burning” lack an *explicit object* in the Hebrew text is also significant. The biblical text would then have been read as “Come, let us make bricks, *but* let us burn (*them*) in the fire.” The verse would now be taken as reference to an un-narrated event in the Babel affair. The identification of ‘them’ with Abram and his eleven cohorts would be a simple hermeneutical elaboration based on the pre-existing interpretations of Gen 11:28 and 15:7.

Another biblical narrative may also be formative in understanding Pseudo-Philo’s account of Babel as idolatrous. Both Jacobson and Fisk have suggested that Gen 11 and the narrative of Israelite apostasy in Exod 32 are analogous events for Pseudo-Philo. “Each narrative is about a rebellion against God,” claims the former:

in which a central role is played by the fabrication of an object partially through the casting of contributed materials into a fire (cf. Exod 32:24). In each case, the sinners are motivated by anxiety.⁴⁰

Fisk’s argument focuses on the inclusion of a rewritten version of Gen 11:6 in Pseudo-Philo’s rewritten version of the Golden Calf episode.⁴¹

And while he [Aaron] was speaking, they did not heed [Aaron] so that the word that was spoken in the time when the people sinned by building the tower might be fulfilled, when God said, “And now unless I stop them, everything that they propose to do they will dare, and even worse.” (L.A.B. 12:3)

Pseudo-Philo creates an explicit connection between the activities of the Babelites and those acts narrated in Exod 32. Building the Golden Calf—a clear and unambiguous act of idolatry—is said to be a fulfillment of a fear enunciated by God prior to his punishment of the Babelites. The apostasy at Sinai is the manifestation of that “even worse” event that God imagines at Babel.⁴² The analogy between these two texts raises the important question of the relationship imagined between the Babelites and Israel. In the rewritten version of Babel in L.A.B. 6, Abram is chosen and separated from sinful humanity by virtue of his faithfulness and willingness to suffer—even unto death. Babel, on this reading, is the background against which Pseudo-Philo

⁴⁰ Jacobson, *Commentary*, 373.

⁴¹ Fisk, *Do You Not Remember*, 141–152; Fisk, “Scripture Shaping Scripture,” 15–21.

⁴² It should be noted that in L.A.B. 12:3 Pseudo-Philo is doubly rewriting the content of Gen 11:6. In L.A.B. 7:2 God determines that “if they are not restrained now, they will be daring in all things they propose to do” (*si modo non prohibeantur, in omnia audeant que presumpserint*). There is no mention here of something even worse than the Tower of Babel. For a chart showing the relationship between L.A.B. 7:2, 12:3 and Gen 11:6, see Fisk, *Do You Not Remember*, 143.

understood the call of Abram and the ultimate election of Israel. The re-reading of the event in Pseudo-Philo's version of Exod 32, however, presents the Babelites as a *type* of faithless Israel.⁴³ Fisk claims Pseudo-Philo first

excludes Israel (represented by Abraham) from the idolatrous masses against whom the verdict was delivered LAB 12.3, however, conveys virtually the opposite impression.⁴⁴

The relationship between the tower builders and Israel-at-large is intentionally ambiguous in Pseudo-Philo. At some points, Pseudo-Philo seems to define Israel over and against the tower builders. But he is also capable of seeing the Babelites as paradigmatic of an Israel consumed by sin and idolatry. Both options are held simultaneously; Israel emerges from the nations, but is always at risk of returning to them. The temptation of Babel is ever present.⁴⁵

The text from Daniel, the potential references to deliverance from fire in Genesis, and the analogical correlation with the Exodus passage can all be used to present a strong argument that Pseudo-Philo considers the Babelites to be engaged in idolatry. Familiarity with the narrative and the ease in explaining the link between Abram and Babel, however, can also blind interpreters to the fundamentally *ambiguous nature* of Pseudo-Philo's reading of Babel. Is idolatry really the central issue for Pseudo-Philo in his rewriting of Babel? Or does the ambiguous invocation of idolatry point to something else? More directly: why do the people wish to inscribe their names on bricks? Why is this act objectionable to Abram and the other eleven? Jacobson has pointed out the problems in reading *L.A.B.* 6 as a story of resistance to idolatry. In most other interpretive traditions dealing with Babel-as-idolatry:

either the builders are actually constructing an instrument of idol-worship or they are erecting a tower that will enable them to do battle with God in heaven. Neither motivation is apparent in LAB.⁴⁶

⁴³ Eckart Reinmuth, *Pseudo-Philo und Lukas: Studien zum Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum und seiner Bedeutung für die Interpretation des lukanischen Doppelwerks* (WUNT 74; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 53.

⁴⁴ Fisk, *Do You Not Remember*, 144.

⁴⁵ Fisk argues that Babel and Sinai in Pseudo-Philo's reading cannot be separated. Because of the typological relationship they have to one another "the Babel apostasy, the blessing of Abraham and the Sinai idolatry are connected parts of a single story, a story whose episodes must be read in proper sequence. If Israel, at Sinai, was choosing to inhabit the world of Genesis 11, God insists that their place is within the covenant established in Genesis 12" (Fisk, *Do You Not Remember*, 152). The separation wrought by God at Babel will always stand, according to this reading.

⁴⁶ Jacobson, *Commentary*, 355.

He continues:

In truth, in this whole section, there is only one possible hint at idol-worship and that is when the recalcitrant dozen defend themselves by saying *unum Dominum novimus, et ipsum adoramus* (we know only one God, and him we worship). But even this need have no reference to worship of other gods.⁴⁷

As we have already seen above, however, it is not without good reason that a whole host of previous commentators have asserted that Pseudo-Philo presents Abram as opposed to idolatry in his refusal to participate in the construction of the Tower of Babel. We should look more closely at the actual encounter between Abram and the people and the precise nature of his refusal. A proper reading of the people's intentions may actually inform our understanding of why the people wish to build the tower in the first place.

They said to each other, "Let us take bricks and let each of us write our names on the bricks (*Accipiamus lapides et scribamus singuli quique nomina nostra in lapides*) and burn them with fire; and what will be burned will serve as mortar and brick." (L.A.B. 6:2)

We should note, first of all, that there is an increased focus on the production of bricks.⁴⁸ Pseudo-Philo has equated the production of bricks with the production of a name: in other words, he has collapsed two actions in the biblical narrative (or, an action and its motivation) into one action. The people are suggesting that the bricks should be taken and inscribed with the names of the people. Vermes suggested, on the basis of a number of rabbinic texts, that the reference to writing names on the bricks is actually a notice of the people's idolatrous intentions. He draws specifically on the assertion that "a name is nothing other than an idol,"⁴⁹ in the words of a tradition contained in *Genesis Rabbah*.⁵⁰ Following this line of reasoning, Murphy

⁴⁷ Ibid., 356.

⁴⁸ There is a small translational problem here. Strictly speaking, the Latin text does not read bricks here but *stones*. Jacobson is aware of the translational problem and entertains the possibility that the initial translator (presumably from Hebrew to Greek?) misunderstood or misread לִבְנֵי as אֲבָנִים: not a very radical suggestion as far as text-emendation is concerned. (This is especially the case given that both terms are present in Gen 11:2). Perhaps his low-estimate of the translator has led Jacobson to discount, *a priori*, even the possibility that the original Hebrew of L.A.B. might have read אֲבָנִים. I grant that reading *lapides* as "stones" is not without its own interpretive problems. Why are straw and water mentioned in L.A.B. 6:16 if bricks are not the building materials? Why is a furnace mentioned in connection with stones?

⁴⁹ *Gen. Rab.* 38:8, see Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 77.

⁵⁰ The equation between name and idol flows from a common circumlocution in rabbinic literature of referring to the divine as "the Name/הַשֵּׁם." By analogy, the attempt to write a name is viewed as an attempt to honor other gods through inscribing their name(s) on bricks.

assumes that the building of the tower and the writing of names on bricks are *a priori* idolatrous acts. This sort of equation is made, however, without any substantial proof.⁵¹ Jacobson has pointed out the difficulty involved in reading the phrase “let each of us write our name on the bricks” as a reference to idolatry. He claims that:

it is one thing for the exegete to explain ‘let us make a name’ as signifying ‘let us make an idol’, quite another to turn ‘let us make a name’ into ‘let us write our names’ meaning ‘let us write our gods’ (presumably the names of the gods?).⁵²

There is, in other words, a long and circuitous exegetical path that one must take from the text of Pseudo-Philo to its idolatrous interpretation.

What, then, are we to make of this bizarre (and singular) reference to the inscription of names on the bricks? If it is not a reference to idolatry, what does it signify? It is possible that the creation of this narrative is a simple reflex of an overly literal mind. The people are presented by Pseudo-Philo as producing actual names for themselves—inscribed on the bricks. Somehow, this possibility is less than satisfying. A more intriguing option is to see the inscription of names as being linked in some manner to the census found in *L.A.B.* 5. The counting of the people is here made a physical and permanent reality through the inscriptional process. Abraham and the devout dozen, according to this reading, are not opposing idolatry but the hubris of the census takers. They refuse to be counted and thus defined by others.

Previous scholars have missed the significance of the call to inscribe names because of the application of the wrong methodology.⁵³ As we have seen, Vermes attempted to explain the inscriptional activity of the Babelites by reference to rabbinic traditions only recorded at a later time than the pro-

⁵¹ Frederick J. Murphy, “Retelling the Bible: Idolatry in Pseudo-Philo,” *JBL* 107 (1988): 275–287; idem., *Pseudo-Philo*, 41–48. Murphy points out that within the narrative world of Pseudo-Philo “making a name for oneself if explicitly connected with idolatry in 44:2” in the account of the Levite and his teraphim (Jud 18). He continues by asserting that Vermes’ theory is interesting but unnecessary “since the building of a tower ‘whose top will reach the heavens’ is itself an act of rebellion against God in Gen 11” (Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo*, 42). I have already argued at length against the easy association of the biblical description of the tower and rebellion. I would point out here additionally that Murphy himself *rewrites the biblical narrative*. The Hebrew text does not read “whose top will reach the heavens” but rather asserts that the tower will have “its head in the heavens.” To make an even more fine distinction, there is a difference between rebellion against God and idolatry. All idolatry may be conceived of as rebellion, but not every act of rebellion involves idolatry.

⁵² Jacobson, *Commentary*, 356.

⁵³ The following interpretation is tentative and the inscription of bricks remains rather mysterious to me.

duction of Pseudo-Philo. Jacobson, in his analysis of the problem, also surveys a number of other scholarly attempts to explain the passage by recourse to rabbinic (and even Greek and Roman) traditions.⁵⁴ Jacobson is—rightly, in my opinion—not persuaded by the answers derived from such comparisons. He does not, however, take the next logical step. Rather than going *outside* the text of the *L.A.B.* to explain the inscriptional Babelites, a more productive approach would begin first by looking for possible biblical parallels (we know Pseudo-Philo was reading the Hebrew Bible) or by surveying the larger narrative of *L.A.B.* Analysis should begin with the most proximate literature and only then move outwards to later texts. Perhaps a brief test-case might point towards the usefulness of this approach.

As stated above, it is possible that the Babelites are actually engaged in inscribing stones. Our first step then would be to explore the biblical canon itself for any reference to stones and inscriptional activity. There is one text which deals at length with the inscription of stones. Towards the conclusion of the book of Deuteronomy, Moses and the leaders remind the Israelites of their responsibility to uphold their end of the covenant with Yahweh. The people are being prepared to cross over the Jordan into the land promised to their ancestors. Once they have arrived in the land, they are to “set up large stones ... Coat them with plaster and inscribe upon them all the words of this Torah” (Deut 27:2).⁵⁵ The biblical logic claims that the inscription of stones takes place solely by divine command. That which is to be inscribed is nothing less than the very foundational charter which will hold the community together in the land they are about to enter. The “words of this Torah” will grant the people a stable and on-going community under the aegis of the divine. Moses and the elders continue by commanding the people also to build an altar to Yahweh. The inscribed stones are more than a memorial—a place for the people to remember their commitments to the covenant—they are also the site of worship and sacrifice.

Are we justified in appealing to this passage from Deuteronomy (or Joshua) in an attempt to understand the import of the Babelites and their writing on stones? The reference to the inscriptional activity is so oblique in Pseudo-Philo (and so isolated in Jewish exegetical tradition) that it is hard to know with any certainty. The biblical text certainly offers an interesting counter-point to the activity of the Babelites: divinely ordained inscription

⁵⁴ Jacobson, *Commentary*, 355–356.

⁵⁵ A similar event is narrated in Josh 8:32 when the people have crossed into the land of Canaan.

of Torah as part of the worship of the Israel versus individual inscription of one's own name in order to build a structure to halt future warfare. One model presents divinely sanctioned inscription as the basis for healthy community over against individualized inscription to delay the deterioration of human community. Idolatry as such is not the question of ultimate importance according to this reading. The specter of idolatry lingers, however, in the biblical echoes heard by Pseudo-Philo.

5. *But Abram Alone Was Silent*

Characterization and motivation have been important in understanding how Pseudo-Philo has placed the narrative of Babel into his rewritten Bible. We now turn to a reading of the substance of *L.A.B.* 6. As already noted, one central theme in *L.A.B.* is the strong distinction drawn between good and bad leaders and, just as importantly, the impact their actions have on Israel-at-large. Nickelsburg has argued that:

although Ps-Philo is clearly concerned with *Israel's* covenant obedience and disobedience, his narrative is focused mainly on Israel's leaders and *their* good and bad characteristics.⁵⁶

Israel as a whole is defined by key moments of obedience or disobedience on the part of their leaders. The narrative of the Tower of Babel in *L.A.B.* is treated by Nickelsburg as a panegyric upon Abram and his exceptional leadership. "Even before the law is given, Abraham renounces idolatry."⁵⁷ Technically speaking, Abram *leads* no one. Although he is mentioned first in the list of the dozen, there is no explicit mention of Abram convincing the others to forgo participating in the building project. He is also the only one to reject an offer of escape put forward by his kinsman, Joktan. Nowhere does he present *himself* as a model for how others should behave. At least within the boundaries of the narrative, he is a leader of one. Yet Abram is, according to Nickelsburg, the protagonist of the narrative, the ideal figure whom the implied audience is expected to emulate. "Pseudo-Philo thus recounts the story of a man whose devotion to God and trust in his justice and deliverance lead him to defy death."⁵⁸ It is for this reason that Jacobson (amongst others) has suggested that the narrative of Abram and the Fiery

⁵⁶ Nickelsburg, "Good and Bad Leaders," 60.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Furnace has a great deal in common with the martyrological tradition in ancient Jewish literature.⁵⁹ The historical context in which such a model of obedience-unto-death would most likely have been propounded will be a topic of discussion below. It is important, first, to understand the various options for faithfulness being presented in Pseudo-Philo's unique interpretive elaboration. I would suggest that Pseudo-Philo presents two models for obedience: Joktan and Abram.

The chief (Joktan) summoned to himself those twelve men and said: "Be confident and do not fear, for you will not die. For God in whom you trust is mighty, and therefore be secure in him, for he will free and save you. But now, behold, I commanded the fifty men to bring you forth, after taking provisions from my house, and to go ahead into the mountains and wait for you in the valley. Fifty other men I will give you to bring you all the way there. Go and hide yourself in the same place in the valley; you will have water to drink that flows from the rocks. Keep yourselves there for thirty days until the anger of the people of the land ceases and until God sends his wrath upon them and breaks them. For I know that the evil plan that they have planned to accomplish will not stand, because their devising is futile." (*L.A.B.* 6:9)

Murphy has claimed "the tower episode shows that Israel has its origins in Abraham, the one who resisted human evil and trusted in God."⁶⁰ The central element of *L.A.B.* 6, however, does not focus on the conflict between Abram and sinful humanity, but on a conflict between Abram and Joktan. This is a conflict in discerning the will of God in an oppressive situation. The choice is not simply between 'good' leadership and 'bad' leadership; reality (even the literary representation of reality) is usually messier than such a simple dichotomy will allow. The form of the conflict, however, is just as important as its substance. Both Joktan and Abram have the authority of Scripture on their side. In a manner similar to the temptation narratives in the Gospels (Matt 4:1–11/Luke 4:1–12), both parties marshal Scripture (explicitly in the Gospels, implicitly in Pseudo-Philo) to justify their positions. We should look more closely, therefore, at the faith of Abram and the faith of Joktan and how Pseudo-Philo constructs the contrast.

⁵⁹ Jacobson states that "LAB's account here falls into the martyr-tale pattern in a number of ways: attempts to persuade, counter-arguments, temporary delay and reprieve, final resolution" (Jacobson, *Commentary*, 359). Comparison with Dan 3 and 2 Macc 7 is common. For a full discussion of martyrological literature in ancient Judaism, see Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Judaism and Christianity* (Figuræ: Reading Medieval Culture; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) and, for a longer historical view, see Shmuel Shepkaru, *Jewish Martyrs in the Pagan and Christian Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁶⁰ Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo*, 230.

Frederick Murphy has isolated a recurring pattern in Pseudo-Philo which highlights the difficulty of conjuring the will of the deity in difficult situations.⁶¹ He claims that there are four elements to the pattern:

(1) evil plans are proposed by enemies of God (2) counter-plans are advanced by characters initially portrayed in a positive light, who express confidence in God's support (3) objections to the counter-plans are raised through an individual (4) God vindicates the latter by acting forcefully—bypassing the counter-plan and punishing the enemies.⁶²

The rewritten narrative of Babel fits nicely into this pattern. Joktan is portrayed as though he has absolute confidence that his escape plan is an action sanctioned by God. He attempts to purchase some time for the dozen while he awaits the future (assured?) retribution of God.⁶³ Joktan appears confident that God will indeed act against the Babelites “for I know that the evil plan that they have planned to accomplish will not stand, because their devising is futile.” Joktan is certain that the Babelites’ plans are evil and misguided and will not be tolerated by the divine. He even addresses the twelve dissenters in language that is redolent of Scripture.

Be confident and do not fear, for you will not die. For God in whom you trust is mighty, and therefore be secure in him, for he will free and save you.

This is absolutely orthodox theology. The people are reassured with the words of Scripture itself. Jacobson suggests that the words of Joktan are meant to echo Isa 35:4.⁶⁴ “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you” (Isa 35:4). The possibility that Pseudo-Philo is purposefully referencing the passage from Isaiah is strengthened by the fact that Joktan assures Abram and the eleven that they should not fear for their wellbeing in the wilderness because “you will have water to drink that flows from the rocks.” This claim is plausibly generated by the continuation of the Isaiah passage:

⁶¹ Murphy actually claims that there are two generic forms merged in this narrative: the plan form and the trial form. See Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo*, 44.

⁶² Murphy, “Divine Plan, Human Plan,” 5.

⁶³ Jacobson suggests connections to the story of the spies and Rahab. “Like (Joktan) here, Rahab conceals the heroes when the enemies come for them and tells them a false story about their escape. Also, both Rahab and (Joktan) make declarations of their belief in the rightness and superiority of the hero’s cause. The alleged nighttime escape also comes from the Rahab tale” (Jacobson, *Commentary*, 363). I would note here that, despite the very learned and detailed commentary of Jacobson, he is often prone to seeing scriptural references or parallels in Pseudo-Philo where they can not be demonstrated clearly to exist. The Rahab/Joktan parallel seems to be a case in point.

⁶⁴ Jacobson, *Commentary*, 361.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.⁶⁵

(Isa 35:6)

Joktan claims that God is mighty and that he is an appropriate object of trust. He will act to free and save the dissenters. Joktan, moreover, equates his plan with what the tradition claims about the very nature of God.

Joktan is an ambiguous character and there are a couple of options for interpreting his statements. Murphy takes a highly critical attitude towards him. He states that “the other eleven resisters see Joktan as their savior and call themselves his servants. Abraham is the servant of God alone.”⁶⁶ Murphy castigates Joktan with the claim that he “combines trust in God with practical action involving cooperation with sinners.”⁶⁷ Finally, Murphy has argued elsewhere that Joktan could have more effectively utilized his leadership position.

Although Joktan is chief of the leaders, he does not simply order them to release the resisters but resorts to subterfuge. He deceives the other leaders by calling the decision of the resisters ‘evil plans’ and by not opposing the death sentence directly. Instead, he proposes that the resisters be given seven days to ‘repent,’ at the end of which time the sentence can be carried out if they do not give in.⁶⁸

This is a somewhat one-sided evaluation of Joktan who puts himself at great risk by employing 100 mighty men—despite his threats to them to remain silent concerning their mission. In addition, Pseudo-Philo earlier has a high evaluation of Joktan: “He ... was seeking a way to save them from the hands of the people, since he was of their tribe and served God” (*L.A.B.* 6:6).⁶⁹ In

⁶⁵ There is also a possible connection to Exodus imagery here. Joktan’s intervention can be read as parallel to the Exodus. He is simply the human actor carrying out the divine purpose in a fashion similar to Moses.

⁶⁶ Murphy, “Divine Plan, Human Plan,” 7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 10. I must admit that I do not see how deceiving sinners by concocting an escape plan for the righteous can be considered co-operation.

⁶⁸ Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo*, 45.

⁶⁹ Even this explicit claim is not sufficient for exonerating Joktan according to Murphy. He states “Joktan ‘served God (*Deo serviebat*)’ but does not receive the title *servus Dei* bestowed on Abraham (6:11), Moses (20:2), the fathers (15:5), and the resisters of Jair’s idolatry” (38:4) (Murphy, “Divine Plan, Human Plan,” 8). I would note that it is *Joktan* who refers to Abram as “servant of God!” Jacobson claims that Joktan is compared to two other figures in the Hebrew Bible. Daniel 6 presents Darius as reluctant to have Daniel cast into the den of lions and Gen 37:21 portrays Reuben arguing for preserving the life of Joseph (Jacobson, *Commentary*, 359–360). Neither of these characters is especially sympathetic, but neither are they condemned. They are, like Joktan, individuals of high standing and authority trapped within the confines of systematic oppression and the demands of the crowd.

addition, the census narrated in *L.A.B.* 5 yields the Shemites 347,600 men “capable of engaging in battle ... and equipped for war,” exclusive of women and children (*L.A.B.* 5:6–7). This is numerically important, but it does not provide Joktan with a super-majority should hostilities arise between his camp and the combined forces of the Japhites (listed at 142,200 in *L.A.B.* 5:4) and Hamites (listed at 244,990 in *L.A.B.* 5:5). Joktan is in a position of *limited strength* with regard to the other armed camps. A coalition of the other two camps would outnumber his military.⁷⁰ His superiority was recognized by Nimrod and Fenech and he is capable of acting with great authority and power, but he must also be careful not to arouse the suspicions of the people at large. He is in a precarious position and his political location must be kept in mind when interpreting his plan of action; such a ruler does not have the luxury of political or theological idealism.

The eleven others apparently perceive in the actions of Joktan the guiding hand of God. Abram, at least, does not respond with a direct rebuke to Joktan for mistaking his own escape plan with that of God’s nor does he try to convince the other eleven to remain with him. If the initial counter-plan is presented in the best possible light, where does the problem begin? While his orthodoxy is beyond reproach, Joktan draws the wrong practical conclusions when faced with a crisis. He is faithful but misguided.

Although I would argue that Pseduo-Philo has a less condemnatory image of Joktan than Murphy would allow, I must concede that Joktan is far from an ideal character. There is one passage where the absolute genuineness of the faith of Joktan might be called into question. In *L.A.B.* 6:14, the other leaders Nimrod and Fenech inquire as to the whereabouts of the dozen dissenters. Joktan claims they have escaped and that he has sent 100 men after them.

But I have sent a hundred men to search for them and instructed them that, if they find them, they should not only burn them in the fire but also give their corpses to the birds of the heavens; let them destroy them in this way.

(*L.A.B.* 6:14)

Joktan is portrayed as very shrewd. To his fellow leaders and to the people at large he appears exquisitely cruel; not only will the fugitives be incinerated, even their remains will be destroyed.⁷¹ Such an act will serve to validate Jok-

⁷⁰ 142,000 Japhites + 244,990 Hamites = 387,190. This is some 39,590 greater than the number of Shemites.

⁷¹ Joktan once again has biblical precedent in this regard. Jacobson claims that “both the idea and language” associated with post-mortem aviary consumption can be connected to Deut 28:26 and 1Sam 17:4. See Jacobson, *Commentary*, 369.

tan's public face before the people while simultaneously allowing a terminus to the search for the fugitives. The passage suggests, finally, that Joktan does not have ultimate faith that God will in fact intervene. He has made contingency plans should the people wish to go and search for the fugitives themselves. If the faith of Joktan is far from flawless, how does Pseudo-Philo present the faith of Abram?

But Abram alone was silent. (Joktan) said to him, "Why do you not answer me, Abram servant of God?" Abram answered and said, "Behold, today I flee to the mountains. If I have escaped the fire, wild beasts will come forth from the mountains and devour us; or we will lack food and die of famine. We will be found to have escaped the people of the land, but to have fallen because of our sins. And now, as surely as God in whom I trust lives, I will not move from my place where they have put me. If there be any sin of mine such that I should be burned, let the will of God be done." And the leader said to him, "Your blood be upon your head if you refuse to go forth with these men. If however you are willing, you will be saved; but if you wish to stay, stay as you wish." And Abram said, "I will not go forth, but I will stay here." (*L.A.B.* 6:11)

Pseudo-Philo has Abram assert the absolute sovereignty of divine action. Jacobson claims that "the absoluteness of the fatalism is marked. Abram knows that if he is destined to die nothing he can do will change that."⁷² The will of the deity can not be thwarted. The language once again is resonant of certain passages in the prophetic corpus which warn of the implacable coming wrath of the divine (e.g., Amos 5:18–20).⁷³ What is the import of Abram's stubbornness? How is the viewpoint adopted by Abram contrasted to that of Joktan and the eleven others? Is Abram here the martyr's model? As noted above, Abram does not chastise Joktan and his eleven dissenting companions harshly. He claims they are misguided in believing they can escape the will of God, certainly. But the center of Abram's argument is that, should the prisoners escape, "we will be found to have escaped the people of the land, but to have fallen because of our sins." It is difficult to know how to interpret this statement.

What is clear is that while Joktan and the other eleven dissenters are concerned with managing a crisis and responding to the threat of physical violence, Abram reframes the issue to one of the divine governance of the world. He refuses to see the threat against him as deriving from a human source; everything is in the hands of God. This raises the very interesting question of whether Abram is delivered because of his resistance to the

⁷² *Ibid.*, 364.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 365.

plans of the Babelites *per se* or because of his exemplary faith in divine justice. Jacobson is wrong to refer to this as fatalism. It is, rather, a profound affirmation of the justness of the divine in the face of oppression. What then of Joktan? It should be noted that, despite all his protestations and limited risk-taking in connection to the dissenters, Joktan does finally acquiesce to the plans of the Babelites when he himself is forced to take Abram and cast him into the furnace.

6:16 They took (Abram) and built a furnace and lit it with fire. They threw the bricks into the furnace to be fired. Then the leader, Joktan, dismayed, took Abram and threw him with the bricks into the fiery furnace. 6:17 But God stirred up a great earthquake, and burning fire leaped forth out of the furnace into flames and sparks of flame, and it burned up all of those standing around in front of the furnace. All who were consumed in that day were 83,500. But there was not even the slightest injury to Abram from the burning of the fire. 6:18 Abram arose out of the furnace and the fiery furnace collapsed.

(*L.A.B.* 6:16–18)

The message is a rather clear and blunt one. It is impossible to negotiate with oppressors in some situations. There are occasions when nothing less than absolute confrontation will suffice. It is *especially* those in a position of power and leadership who must ultimately make the costly decision to take sides. Joktan does so when he casts Abram into the furnace to burn. The one who sought to negotiate, prevaricate and to anticipate the will of God finally is willing to become the executioner of the servant of God, Abram. No amount of scriptural echoing or appeals to the tradition can obscure such a reality.

6. *The Futility of Resistance and the Persistence of Israel*

Two central concerns are at the heart of Pseudo-Philo's Babel narrative: the true definition of faithfulness in an oppressive situation and the ease with which a positive human desire for unity can be transformed into rebelliousness. Understanding the Babel narrative of *L.A.B.* 6 as a translation will require placing the text in some relative historical setting. As noted above, most commentators view the work as a Jewish-Palestinian work prior to the Roman conquest of 70 CE.⁷⁴ The narrative elements previously discussed make a great deal of sense in light of such unsettled times in ancient Judea.

⁷⁴ Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo*, 262–270.

A model for my reading of Babel is provided by Saul Olyan who has attempted to isolate Pseudo-Philo's ideology and background through an analysis of the rewritten narrative of the Israelites' adventure at the Sea of Reeds.⁷⁵ Pseudo-Philo presents the Israelites splitting into three factions, each constituted by a number of tribes, when faced with the pursuit of the Egyptians following the exodus event. Olyan claims that "this discussion of options is an outgrowth of early exegesis of Exod. 14:11–14."⁷⁶ Pseudo-Philo is thus inheriting a previous tradition about this key moment in Israel's history and modifying it to speak to his own readership. One group of tribes claims that suicide is the best option: "Come, let us cast ourselves into the sea. For it is better for us to die in the water than to be killed by our enemies" (*L.A.B.* 10:3). Another group suggests returning to Egypt and serving the Egyptians. A final group, however, counsels outright resistance. "Let us take up our weapons and fight with them, and God will be with us" (*L.A.B.* 10:3)! Olyan suggests that it is significant that the last viewpoint is attributed to the tribes of Levi, Judah, Joseph and Benjamin as these tribes are "traditionally the most favored" and

there is some evidence from the literature of this period that the favored tribes of the Bible are used to identify the position of the text's writer and the writer's community.⁷⁷

Other incarnations of this interpretive tradition present *four options* and culminate with Moses counseling the people: "Have no fear! Stand by and witness the deliverance which the LORD will work for you today" (Exod 14:13).⁷⁸ Pseudo-Philo's version of the event is, moreover, in some tension with the biblical account.

Pseudo-Philo highlights and favors the martial position even though it does not integrate well with the Exodus 14 narrative. Before the people of Israel even have to fight in Pseudo-Philo's telling, God delivers them from the Egyptians, as in Exodus 14. The reader is left somewhat puzzled, since much has

⁷⁵ Saul Olyan, "The Israelites Debate their Options at the Sea of Reeds: LAB 10:3, Its Parallels, and Pseudo-Philo's Ideology and Background," *JBL* 110 (1991): 75–91. Olyan's article compares other interpretive versions of the story of Israel at the Reed Sea with that contained in *L.A.B.* 10:3 and argues for a common exegetical tradition which pre-dated Pseudo-Philo's composition and was continued and developed by later Jewish authors as well. By comparing Pseudo-Philo's version of the event with other ancient Jewish version, Olyan demonstrates the concerns which were characteristic of Pseudo-Philo and his audience. Frederick J. Murphy has responded at length to Olyan's work. See Murphy, "The Martial Option in Pseudo-Philo," 676–688.

⁷⁶ Olyan, "The Israelites Debate their Options," 75.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

been made of the martial position. The narrative as a result is rather less effective than it might have been, though it does function to bring Pseudo-Philo's position into greater relief.⁷⁹

Judging by the account of the Sea of Reeds, we might conclude that the ideology and background of Pseudo-Philo's rewriting of biblical narratives is one in which suicide and surrender are discouraged and violent opposition is viewed as a faithful response. Olyan states that "the theme of resistance to oppressors is characteristic of the whole of Pseudo-Philo's work."⁸⁰ Such resistance is presented as calling forth a divine response. "God will act with the resisters on Israel's behalf against the enemy."⁸¹ The claim that Pseudo-Philo favors the "martial option" is especially compelling because he presents resistance in *L.A.B.* 10:3 even when it means reading against the grain of the biblical narrative itself.

It is difficult to locate the incarnation of this interpretive tradition with any sort of historical specificity. Ancient Judean subjugation to external power was far too common to view the Sea of Reeds tradition against any particular historical horizon. The earliest versions of the tradition could plausibly be dated to the Maccabean period, or even earlier. It would only be with the destruction of the temple, the failure of open rebellion and the lack of divine intervention that non-martial options would likely come to the fore. According to Olyan, Pseudo-Philo's preference for a martial option demonstrates that he was reforming traditional Jewish exegesis of Exod 14 to speak to internal political issues during the Jewish War.

Factionalism and debate within Israel are highlighted in 10:3 as they are elsewhere in the *Liber* (Abraham, Amram, Kenaz), and this may suggest that all options (cooperate, resist, commit suicide in the face of adversity) are still open to the Jewish community. After 70, this would not have been the case. Josephus' reports consistently feature widespread conflict and factionalism among Jews. If we can believe Josephus, the Jewish War was on one level a civil war. Even families were divided on the issue of resistance.⁸²

How does Abram and his encounter with the Babelites look in light of the theory espoused by Olyan?⁸³ One possible critique of Olyan's approach is

⁷⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 85.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 91.

⁸³ It is not possible to replicate the methodology utilized by Olyan with regard to the Babel narrative because of the exegetical isolation of the association of Abram with the Tower of Babel.

that he has translated an element of plot into a larger abstract concept. The Israelites are not debating how best to respond to oppression *in general* in *L.A.B.* 10:3, but how best to respond when faced with the Sea on one side and the Egyptian army on the other. In such a setting, one could argue that armed resistance might be the only faithful response possible. But the narrative of Babel presents a different challenge and criteria for faithfulness. Murphy is critical of Olyan's attempt to distill the narrative of Israelite factionalism at the Reed Sea into a political slogan or program which can then be located in the history of ancient Judaism.

One must exercise caution in moving from the story world to the world outside the story. This is true particularly since there are places within the Biblical Antiquities where God disapproves of military action, and places where such action receives divine approbation. The real principle, valid for all circumstances, to be drawn from Biblical Antiquities 10 and from the rest of the Biblical Antiquities are that God always stands by Israel, that God's chastisement of Israel is always just and temporary, and that any action, military or not, undertaken at Israel's or its leaders' initiative instead of God's is doomed to failure.⁸⁴

Murphy's caution concerning the move from story world to real world is well taken. Any understanding of Pseudo-Philo as a translation of Gen 11, however, will require some discussion of the political program imagined or advocated by Pseudo-Philo, even if historical specifics are not forthcoming. Contrasting the options available at the Sea of Reeds with the narrative found in *L.A.B.* 6 is a useful exercise in this regard. In a manner similar to the suicide-group mentioned above, Abram and the dozen are willing to die for the cause. Fighting back against the Babelites is not an option for Abram and the others. They are, however, willing to be killed rather than go along with the demands of the people of the land. The dozen even invoke a statement of faith ("we know only one God and him do we serve"), an element common to many ancient Jewish and Christian narrations of martyrdoms.⁸⁵ After Abram and his allies are out of immediate harm, however, the narrative dynamic shifts. Unlike the encounter between the Egyptians and Israelites at the Sea of Reeds, there are now *more than three* options available. The dozen can escape and live to (perhaps) fight another day. The model embodied in Joktan and the eleven dissenters is an

⁸⁴ Murphy, "The Martial Option," 688.

⁸⁵ Boyarin claims that "a ritualized and performative speech act associated with a statement of pure essence becomes the central action of the martyrology" (Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 95).

absolutely logical one which ultimately *discourages* martyrdom. One must resist—even to the point of death—if no other options exist. Once another choice is available, however, one is not required to lay down one's life.

The question addressed by Pseudo-Philo's rewritten Babel concerns *how* one faithfully responds in dangerous situations *if the crisis can be managed*. Once again Murphy is instructive. He suggests that

most Palestinian Jews of the first century tired to live in peace under Roman domination and engaged in violence only as a last resort. In response to oppression, they first turned to various forms of nonviolent protest, which the Romans often met with repression.⁸⁶

Murphy suggests that open-conflict was often minimized in light of real-life calculations. The most famous cases of Jewish resistance to Roman rule often revolved around issues touching on perceived idolatry (e.g., the attempt by Alexandrian mobs to set up images of the Emperor Gaius in the synagogues of Alexandria in 32–33 CE and the subsequent Jewish resistance, discussed in Philo's *De Legatione ad Gaium*).⁸⁷ If a conflict did not rise to the level of idolatry, it was reasonable and faithful to find a way to make peace with the Gentile authorities.

On such a reading, Abram is held up as an image of one who is unwilling to negotiate in any way with the evil plans of those who are not Israel. He is engaged in passive-resistance. What is puzzling is his refusal to go along with Joktan and the eleven others when presented with an escape plan. He refuses to see the hand of God in the actions of Joktan and insists on forcing a confrontation between himself and the Babelites. This is a rather hard-line approach. What other interpreters have failed to note or appreciate in the debate between Abram and Joktan is the great temptation present. Throughout the narrative Joktan is presented as appealing to and speaking in the language of Scripture. Joktan is portrayed as a partially sympathetic character in Pseudo-Philo's retelling of Babel. He speaks as one with political authority who works behind the scenes to bring about the liberation

⁸⁶ Murphy, "The Martial Option," 688. Murphy is drawing of the works of Richard Horsley and John Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (New York: Seabury, 1985) and Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987). In both works, social-scientific data related to modes of resistance amongst oppressed minorities are used to re-read passages from Josephus and the Gospels.

⁸⁷ For a discussion of the Alexandrian pogrom, see John M.G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora. From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1996), 51–60; see also, Erich S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 54–83.

and salvation of the people of God. His theological assertions are absolutely correct and he converses in the language of scripture itself. The dissenters who follow his counsel are not criticized and, indeed, they are protected by Abram through prevarication when he is questioned concerning their whereabouts. Joktan is analogous to countless other figures from the biblical corpus (Joseph in Egypt, Mordecai in Persia) who work within the limits imposed from outside to bring about liberation for God's people. In contrast, Abram is pictured as stubborn and intractable. The ideal figure to be emulated, however, is one who has absolute and unwavering conviction that the will of God should be accomplished, even when (perhaps especially when) that will is inscrutable and costly. Placing such a model of faithfulness into a specific historical context is a precarious undertaking. On numerous other grounds, scholars have dated Pseudo-Philo to the final years before (or even during) the Jewish revolt against Rome. It is during this period that Pseudo-Philo's translation of the tower must also be placed. Murphy claims that "Joktan ... wants to protect true worshippers of God while appearing to cooperate with idolatrous rulers."⁸⁸ He concludes with the observation that "the real author may well have known many such leaders in his own time."⁸⁹ If so, the presentation of Joktan is a stinging rebuke to the type of politics practiced by them.

7. Conclusion

On the verge of war with Rome and racked by the problem of internal dissonance, Pseudo-Philo's rewriting of Babel argues against being overly concerned with political unity. Even the fear of dispersion and future hostilities amongst previously unified groups is not sufficient cause for joining together in violation of the will of God. Unity for its own sake, according to Pseudo-Philo, is politically and religiously bankrupt. It will most certainly not result in salvation. Depending on one's interpretation of the inscriptional Babelites, unity for its own sake may even be viewed as no better than idolatry. Jews during the revolt against Rome were presented with unity as a great temptation. *Political unity was seen as essential and as a good unto itself.* Such unity was thought to be the only hope for a future without hostility. Another approach believed that accommodation was possible and necessary. While an accommodationist approach could conceivably require

⁸⁸ Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo*, 265.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

co-operation with the enemy, it presented itself as valid and faithful in light of larger Scriptural narratives. Joktan's intentions are good and he seeks to participate in the sure salvation which God will bring about. If he is guilty of any crime, it is simple *Realpolitik*. A final approach rejected the other two and focused on trusting in the will of the divine—regardless of the outcome. Abram is exemplary and emblematic of how the author of Pseudo-Philo proposes his own generation should respond to the aggressive and hegemonic power of its own time, Rome.

In light of Pseudo-Philo's reading of Babel, I would argue that the power of Rome and its ability to destroy the righteous is ultimately not to be feared *as much as* the good and right-sounding intentions of those who hold that God's will must rely on human assistance or accommodation to the wishes of the nations. Absolute and uncompromising resistance to the (idolatrous) desires of the majority—even when they are presented in the language of Scripture or with references to the grand narratives of Israel's history—is the very model of Obedient-Israel. Abram does not simply reject the actions of the Babelites, but the very foundation and systems of power which they reflect. According to Pseudo-Philo, it was Abram's silence and his willingness to submit himself to the will of God—whatever it may be—which led to the salvation of Abram and the election of Israel. Faced with Roman destruction, no accommodation is possible. Only submission to the inscrutable will of God can be considered faithfulness.

CHAPTER FIVE

JOSEPHUS AND THE INFLUENCE OF ANXIETY: COLONIZING THE TOWER AND THE POLITICS OF DISPERSION

Two factors basically determine the image of a work of literature as projected by a translation. The two factors are, in order of importance, the translator's ideology (whether he/she willingly embraces it, or whether it is imposed on him/her as a constraint of some form of patronage) and the poetics dominant in the receiving literature at the time the translation is made.¹

1. *Introduction*

Flavius Josephus—priest, general, and historian—presents us with a political translation of the narrative of the tower. *The Judean Antiquities*, the largest extant work of the author, re-presents the history of the Jewish people from the creation of the world up to the close of the Second Temple period. Unlike the authors examined in the preceding chapter, Josephus offers an explicit comment on the intent of his work and, therefore, of its supposed relationship to the underlying biblical text. He claims that the *Antiquities* “is going to encompass our entire ancient history² and constitution of the state, translated (μεθερμηνεύω) from the Hebrew writings” (*AJ.* 1.5).³ Such frankness on the part of the author, however, does not answer all questions we might have concerning Josephus' conception and use of the Hebrew Bible.

¹ André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Routledge, 1992), 41.

² For a discussion of the genre of antiquities, see Tessa Rajak, “Josephus and the Archaeology of the Jews,” in *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome: Studies in Cultural and Social Interaction* (AGJU 48; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 241–255.

³ English translations of the *Judean Antiquities* are from Louis H. Feldman, *Judean Antiquities 1–4* (Leiden: Brill, 2004). Greek text is drawn from the Loeb Classical Library edition.

Josephus' hermeneutic, despite detailed examination by numerous scholars, continues to be a source of on-going debate.⁴ How are we to understand Josephus' approach to Scripture? A second question, equally debatable, is the intended audience of the *Antiquities*. As we will see, the presumed audience has a great deal to do with how Josephus' hermeneutic is conceived. Having addressed these important preliminaries, I will suggest that Josephus modifies the story of Babel by recasting it in light of Greek and Roman mythological and political notions. Finally, the representation of Babel in light of Greek and Roman terminology is meant to appeal simultaneously to two different audiences. In a Babelian hermeneutic of his own, Josephus recasts the account of the tower to communicate distinct messages to both Gentile and Jewish readers. I will present, therefore, two readings of Josephus' rewritten Babel.

2. *Translated from the Hebrew Writings:*
The Hermeneutics of Josephus

There has been no lack of scholarly attention directed towards Josephus' exegetical proclivities.⁵ Numerous articles and monographs have analyzed the author's approach to biblical stories and characters. A common problem that besets any reading of Josephus' *Antiquities* is ascertaining the genre of the work. Of all the works under consideration in this study, Josephus presents the most explicit comment on his own hermeneutic—he claims not to have one! Josephus asserts that he is simply providing a translation

⁴ The secondary literature in this regard is massive. A representative sampling of the material would include two works by Christopher Begg, *Josephus' Account of the Early Divided Monarchy* (AJ 8, 212–420): *Rewriting the Bible* (BETL 108; Leuven: Peeters, 1993) and *Josephus' Story of the Later Monarchy* (AJ 9, 1–10, 185) (BETL 145; Leuven: Peeters, 2000); see an additional two by Louis Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation of the Bible* (London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible* (JSJSup 58; Leiden: Brill, 1998); most recently, see Zuleika Rogers, "Josephus's Biblical Interpretation," in *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism* (ed. Matthias Henze; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 436–464.

⁵ To speak of Josephus' hermeneutical approach is to assume that he is not simply drawing on interpretive traditions known from his youth in Palestine (see below). In such a view, Josephus' hermeneutic is simply that of his sources. Much 19th century scholarship, furthermore, assumed that Josephus was not really the author of much of the *Antiquities*. The first attempt to deal systematically with Josephus' interpretive approach to biblical literature was the Harvard dissertation of Harold W. Attridge, *The Interpretation of Biblical History in the Antiquitates Judaicae of Flavius Josephus* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1976).

of the Hebrew Bible. This assertion has occasioned a good deal of debate. Feldman, for instance, has explored the various terms used by Josephus for “translation” and has determined that “they are all ambiguous and seem to include paraphrasing and amplifying.”⁶ In addition, Feldman points to the use of the same term (μεθερμηνεύω) in *Antiquities* 12.20 when Josephus presents the account of the translation of the Pentateuch into Greek. According to Feldman, Josephus is presenting an analogy between his work and the Septuagint (LXX). Josephus is placing his own work in rather good company. The *Antiquities*, however, is much more expansive than even the most interpretive passages of the Septuagint. Josephus’ appeal to the Septuagint as predecessor may have less to do with the respective hermeneutical approaches of the two works and more to do with “the sense of authority which would have been associated with an ancient text”⁷ like the Septuagint. According to this reading, Josephus is attempting to claim some of the authority accorded to the Septuagint-as-Scripture for his own work. The question of the authority Josephus seeks to conjure by reference to the Septuagint implicates another uncertain question—the intended audience of the *Antiquities*. For the comparison between the *Antiquities* and the Septuagint to have its rhetorical effect, we must assume an intended audience which would accord some level of authority to the Greek Bible. As we will see below, this is no small assumption.

When Josephus is treated as possessing his own hermeneutic, it is often viewed as suspect. A focus on the biography of Josephus too often interferes with an impartial analysis of his intent in *Antiquities*. The pro-Roman, Flavian apologetic author of *The Jewish War* is often treated as less than worthy of exegetical respect.⁸ Because it is all too easy to point to cases where Josephus is moving beyond simple translation of the biblical text, Josephus is often traduced; he is treated as less than forthright in his claim that he is translating. His claim to textual fidelity is not helped by those occasions where Josephus omits embarrassing passages from the Hebrew Bible, most

⁶ Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, 3. For a full discussion of the various usages of the term μεθερμηνεύω in the writings of Josephus, see Feldman, *Josephus’ Interpretation of the Bible*, 44–45. See also Feldman, *Studies in Josephus’ Rewritten Bible* (JSJSup 58; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 539–543.

⁷ Paul Spilsbury, *The Image of the Jew in Flavius Josephus’ Paraphrase of the Bible* (TSAJ 69; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 15.

⁸ The designation of *The Jewish War* as propaganda for Flavian interests is increasingly criticized. See James S. McClaren, “A Reluctant Provincial: Josephus and the Roman Empire in *The Jewish War*,” in *The Gospel of Matthew in its Roman Imperial Context* (ed. John Riches and David C. Sims; JSNTSup; London: T & T Clark, 2005), 34–48.

famously the incident of the Golden Calf in Exod 32–34. But biography is not the best lens through which to re-construct Josephus' hermeneutic and Spilsbury cautions that "perspectives based solely on Josephus' character can never offer more than mere speculation and such speculation should be recognized for what it is."⁹ This approach is in contrast with Feldman's comments above. He is attempting to demonstrate that Josephus is not really claiming to offer a 'translation' in any modern sense of the term. His departures from the biblical text, therefore, should not be held against him. He is working with a much broader cultural understanding of the practice of translation which includes (and explains) any particular divergence from the biblical text. Feldman ends his discussion of the translational activity of Josephus with the following:

We may conclude that since Josephus viewed himself as carrying on the tradition of the LXX in rendering the Bible for Gentiles, he conceived of his task as not merely translating but as also interpreting the Scriptures, and therefore he did not conceive of himself as adding or subtracting anything if he continued the LXX's tradition of liberal clarification.¹⁰

This is translation in its broadest possible sense—translation is the equivalent of interpretation.

But there is another claim by Josephus which has also proven problematic. Following a brief encomium on the virtues of the law-giver Moses, Josephus claims that:

this narrative ... will set forth the precise details of what is in the Scripture according to its proper order (ταξίς). For I promised that I would do this throughout this treatise, neither adding nor omitting anything. (A.J. 1.17)

The impression given is that Josephus will faithfully render the biblical narrative according to its canonical order. Elsewhere, however, Josephus admits that he has re-arranged some material.

The arrangement of each topic (of the Law) has been innovated by us. For the writings were left by him (Moses) in scattered condition, just as he ascertained each item from God. (A.J. 4.197)

Even the briefest familiarity with the *Antiquities* proves that Josephus has indeed re-arranged a good deal of material; he has also added and omitted much. Much of this re-arrangement takes place well outside of the bounds

⁹ Spilsbury, *Image of the Jew*, 11.

¹⁰ Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, 4.

of the legal material attributed to Moses. In his own narration of the Babel account, Josephus will resort to re-arranging material in order to create an account that is without contradiction.

An additional example of the ways in which a concern with Josephus' character too often interferes with an interpretation of Josephus' writings is the comment of H. Basser who has suggested that the re-arrangement of material in the *Antiquities* should be viewed as a product of Josephus' exegetical environment. "Anyone with integrity could only re-arrange the order of Scriptural narratives if he believed that by such re-ordering he was producing the story intended by Scripture."¹¹ Josephus, therefore, claims some sort of fidelity with regard to the Scriptural text: he is translating, adhering to the proper order of the Scriptural narrative, and "omitting nothing." All three of these claims prove to be problematic. Both Feldman and Basser, each in their own way, attempt to demonstrate how Josephus' rewritten Bible is in cultural conformity with larger notions of acceptable handling of ancient Jewish sacred texts. Josephus is thereby exculpated. He is not guilty of engaging in any type of exegetical activity that is beyond the acceptable bounds of his hermeneutical contemporaries. Basser and Feldman are certainly correct in their assertions that Josephus' reading and rewriting of biblical materials is unexceptional from the perspective of Second Temple literature. Josephus' own assertions, however, about the nature of his work and its relationship to the biblical text do appear unique when compared to the works examined in the previous chapter.

Josephus engages in the same types of rewriting as *Jubilees* and Pseudo-Philo, but he wants to ground his work in terms and notions drawn from Greek and Roman historians. Feldman has suggested that Josephus' claims concerning textual fidelity are best understood in light of other ancient historians. "This kind of programmatic statement," says Feldman, "as we see in other historians of the era (e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnasus, Thucydides), is intended merely to assure the reader that the historian has done his research honestly."¹² It is not necessary to demonstrate fidelity, merely to assert it.

¹¹ H.W. Basser, "Josephus as Exegete," *JAOS* 107.1 (1987): 22.

¹² Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible*, 540. Feldman continues by noting that "the historian, as the successor to the prophets, is one who views matters in the large and consequently, to the ordinary reader, may appear at times to distort details. Moreover, in taking such liberties, Josephus had the precedent of the Bible itself, namely the Book of Chronicles" (Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible*, 540–541).

2.1. *Jewish Backgrounds*

Given that Josephus does add non-biblical material to his reading of the Hebrew Bible, a logical question deals with the origin and purpose of these additions. Here biography is not only helpful, but essential. Josephus moved between two worlds: the Jewish-Palestinian world of his youth and early adult life and the Roman world where he spent most of the remainder of his life—especially his literary life. These two worlds each had a profound influence on Josephus' interpretation of the Bible and are interwoven in his rewritten Babel.

There are those scholars who see Josephus standing firmly within a tradition of Jewish interpretive literature—including Second Temple and Rabbinic texts, even if most would not go so far as Rappaport in his claim that Josephus "is a child of Rabbinism."¹³ This approach is most clearly articulated by H.W. Basser, who claims that:

Josephus clearly read textual oddities and his additions and deletions show us both his conceptions of how the biblical text was meant to be read and the standards of public exegesis demanded by the tradition in which he saw himself. There are many connections between the hermeneutics of Josephus and those of the Rabbis of the midrash.¹⁴

Basser is correct to highlight continuities in hermeneutical practice between Josephus and later Jewish interpretive literature, even if he overestimates the degree of similarity. Here the connection is between *the approach* to Scripture itself rather than the produced interpretations; although, in most cases, the hermeneutical approach can only be inferred from exegetical traditions common to Josephus and other Jewish texts from the Second Temple and early rabbinic periods. A more dubious method compares exegetical traditions found in later rabbinic literature with traditions found (or, sometimes, not found) in Josephus. While he certainly does not deny the influence of Greek and Roman thought, Feldman's commentary on *Antiquities* 1–4 makes an implicit connection between Josephus and later rabbinic traditions. The copious footnotes often highlight the similarities or differences present between Josephus' interpretation of a biblical passage and later rabbinic responses. Mark Roncace has criticized this approach. He has argued that Feldman often uses his extensive knowledge of rabbinic

¹³ Salomo Rappaport, *Agada und Exegese bei Flavius Josephus* (Wien: Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation, 1930), xv.

¹⁴ Basser, "Josephus as Exegete," 21.

traditions of interpretation to explain Josephus' interpretation of Scripture. So, for example, if Josephus does not utilize a tradition known to the rabbis, Josephus is disagreeing with or rejecting that tradition. Roncace claims that such a method is founded on anachronism and that redaction criticism provides a more credible model for understanding the interpretive work of Josephus.

It is clear that only the biblical account is prior to Josephus; and it is equally clear that the biblical text was Josephus' main source ... reading [*Antiquities*] alongside the Bible, accordingly, is to employ redaction-critical analysis; one asks how Josephus has edited (redacted) the biblical story.¹⁵

When it comes to Josephus' knowledge of exegetical traditions contained elsewhere only in rabbinic texts redacted at a later date we must remain resolutely agnostic. Similarities may be interesting, but they can not provide conclusive proof that Josephus was working with a larger tradition of Jewish interpretation. We may certainly note *positive* cases where Josephus and rabbinic texts share exegetical traditions. We cannot, however, argue that if Josephus does not utilize an exegetical tradition found in rabbinic literature that Josephus is somehow *arguing* with the rabbinic texts.

Even with such methodological caution, it can not be denied that Josephus, as the product of a priestly education in Palestine, would have been familiar with many interpretive traditions contained in later rabbinic texts—as well as many traditions which were not included. Schwartz has argued that:

even if we disregard Josephus' claim of having been at 14 a great expert in Jewish law, one must still reckon with the fact that he came from a well-to-do priestly family of Jerusalem and may be assumed to have received an education appropriate to his social class.¹⁶

In what follows, however, I am far more interested in the particular ways Josephus utilizes exegetical traditions than I am in their supposed origin. Exegetical traditions are not manifestations of timeless hermeneutical

¹⁵ Mark Roncace, "Another Portrait of Josephus' Portrait of Sampson," *JSJ* 35 (2004): 186. I would modify Roncace slightly. While we are only able to prove that the biblical source was prior to Josephus, it is highly likely that Josephus was familiar with many of the exegetical traditions known to us from later rabbinic texts. See also, Roncace, "Josephus' (real) portraits of Deborah and Gideon: A reading of *Antiquities* 5.198–232," *JSJ* 31 (2000): 247–274. Feldman also responds to Roncace in, Feldman, "On Professor Marc Roncace's Portraits of Deborah and Gideon in Josephus," *JSJ* 32 (2001): 193–220.

¹⁶ Seth Schwartz, *Josephus and Judean Politics* (Columbia Studies in the Classic Tradition 18; Leiden: Brill, 1990), 56.

practices. *They emerge from encounters between particular texts and authors on one hand and social, political and historical events on the other.* Even similar exegetical traditions can serve quite different functions in interpretive texts from roughly the same time period.

2.2. Greek and Roman Backgrounds

This focus on ‘context’ for the development and use of exegetical traditions leads to another question: how does one determine the amount of influence Greek and Roman thought had on Josephus’ works? This question is once again closely tied to the notion of audience with regard to the *Antiquities*. Was Josephus attempting to compose a work which would be of interest to a gentile audience? Gregory Sterling has classified the *Antiquities* as an example of “apologetic historiography.” Sterling defines the term as:

the story of a subgroup of people in an extended prose narrative written by a member of the group who follows the group’s own traditions but Hellenizes them in an effort to establish the identity of the group within the setting of the larger world.¹⁷

In order to make the history of the Jewish people understandable (and acceptable) to a larger Gentile world, Josephus re-casts much of the biblical material in Hellenistic garb. The question then becomes how much (and what forms of) Greek and Roman thought we should import in our attempt to understand Josephus’ re-presentation of biblical material. The oft-made comparison between the *Judean Antiquities* and the *Roman Antiquities* of Dionysius of Halicarnasus is used as evidence of Josephus’ desire to imitate Greek and Roman literary style. Mason has argued that:

we observe that the *Antiquitates Judaicae* embodies what are often considered characteristic traits of Roman historiography. Namely, it is a character-driven history, a story of *exempla* that invites the author’s and audience’s moral-rhetorical evaluation of each individual as a guide to present conduct.¹⁸

Such imitation also includes the translation of the biblical narrative into the language used by Greek and Roman authors. Key terms take on great significance in Josephus’ re-presentation of biblical narrative.

¹⁷ Gregory E. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition: Josephos, Luke-Acts, and Apologetic Historiography* (SupNovT 64; Leiden: Brill, 1992), 17.

¹⁸ S. Mason, “Flavius Josephus in Flavian Rome: Reading On and Between the Lines,” in *Flavian Rome: Culture, Image, Text* (ed. A.J. Boyle and W.D. Dominik; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 569.

Much of the preceding discussion has centered on the question of intended audience with regard to Josephus' work. In order to understand fully Josephus' hermeneutic and the method of his rewriting of the tower narrative, we must first ascertain the original "intended audience(s)" of his *Antiquities*. There is ample evidence from the text of the *Antiquities* that Josephus' primary intended audience was Gentile. The numerous explanations of Jewish traditions and terms alone point to such a conclusion. It is, however, possible that Josephus is often addressing his work to two audiences simultaneously. The outward form may often draw on Greek and Roman language while also being aimed at Jews. The use of Hellenistic language and concepts, at least, should not *preclude* an intended Jewish audience. This is especially the case with regard to those Jews living in the Diaspora whom we may assume were somewhat familiar with Greek and Roman culture. Josephus possesses a Babelian hermeneutic in his attempt to speak two different languages in presenting his work to two distinct audiences.

The question of the intended audience of the *Antiquities* has been the subject of recent discussions. Steve Mason has argued that scholars have traditionally framed the question of the audience of the *Antiquities* as one of Jewish *or* Gentile. Such dichotomy has led to a failure on the part of many interpreters to ask even the most basic questions about the context in which the *Antiquities* was written and published. To even speak of 'publishing' is to invite anachronism. Mason states that:

in first-century Rome, no one could write a substantial work in quiet anonymity as we do, then pass it to a publisher for printing and marketing to an abstractly imaged target audience. Rather, the production of almost every book was a social affair.¹⁹

The original audience of the *Antiquities* is too often discussed in the vaguest language. Mason provides a pastiche of quotes from Josephus scholars to prove his point. This catena of quotes includes:

Josephus addresses his *Antiquities* ... to the 'entire Greek world' (*A.J.* 1.5) ... Generally speaking, scholars have taken him at his word and imaged a vague international audience: 'the Graeco-Roman world', 'gentile public opinion', 'the Greek world at large', or some similarly abstract combination of Greeks and Jews. Given ancient publication practices, however, and the need for a community of support around the author and his developing book, we should look first for a real audience in Rome.²⁰

¹⁹ Mason, "Introduction to the Judean Antiquities," in *Judean Antiquities* 1–4, xvii.

²⁰ Mason, "Flavius Josephus in Flavian Rome: Reading On and Between the Lines," 565.

This interpretive blind-spot has been exacerbated by a fairly rigid scheme for interpreting the larger Josephan corpus. According to this traditional view, the *War* is interpreted as crass apologetic for the Flavian dynasty and as justification for the Roman capture of Judea. The *Antiquities*, in contrast, is read as an attempt by Josephus to justify Judaism to the Gentile world and, perhaps, to return to the good graces of his own people. Mason points out that this general dynamic has largely been abandoned in most recent work: the *War* is less apologetic than it might first appear to be and it is difficult to see how the *Antiquities* could bring about détente with Josephus' co-religionists.

Mason re-focuses the question of audience from a generic 'Gentile' designation to a more specific one. He reads Josephus' works, including the *Antiquities*, as a product of an author working under the constraints—both literary and political—of Flavian Rome. Mason notes that Josephus' literary career took place entirely within the city of Rome. Scholars have failed to take this particular context with the seriousness it deserves. To the extent that literary parallels are adduced they are often to Greek literature (such as Thucydides). Reading Josephus as a Roman author, so Mason argues, will provide a more nuanced understanding of his works. Drawing on an influential article by the classicist Frederick Ahl, Mason argues that Josephus' works should be read with an ear attuned to the ironic. Ahl argued that Greek and Roman authors preferred figurative language to straightforward discourse. This literary value held that "only a man of refinement could craft his language so as to embed important discoveries for the audience to make."²¹ What was a literary virtue in much Greco-Roman literature increasingly became a political necessity under the rule of Vespasian, Titus and Domitian. Mason suggests that:

given both a general taste for elusive language in antiquity and the specific constraints of imperial Rome ... we should at least ask about the ironic dimensions of any text we study from the period.²²

Josephus, in other words, may sometimes be saying more than meets the eye.

The key term from the previous quote is *irony* and Mason explores the ironical elements present within Josephus' works. The history of the term

²¹ F.M. Ahl, "The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome," *American Journal of Philology* 105 (1984): 196.

²² Steven Mason, "Figured Speech and Irony in Josephus" in *Flavius Josephus & Flavian Rome* (ed. Jonathan Edmonson, Steve Mason, and James Rives; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 244.

irony within Greek and Roman literature is far beyond the scope of this study. Mason, however, has outlined several stages in the understanding of irony in antiquity, from an understanding of irony as “nothing more than a distasteful evasiveness or lack of candor” to a more mature understanding which views irony “as similar to other rhetorical methods of misdirection.”²³ In such cases, the term is often paired with terminology such as “figured ... refracted ... or encoded speech.”²⁴ Irony and figured speech are, therefore, both forms of literary misdirection. The goal of such misdirection may be quite innocent, the product of literary taste or the desire for an intellectual game. In other times and places, including Rome under the Flavians, and particularly under Domitian, misdirection may be a political necessity. Mason asserts that:

Josephus wrote in Domitian's Rome, at about the time the *princeps* was getting rid of nobles who had hinted criticism of his monarchical rule, also of some who stood accused of Judaising.²⁵

The political environment in which Josephus wrote would certainly have invited literary “misdirection”—particularly, perhaps, by an author of Judean origin.

The context of Josephus' *Antiquities* is therefore considerably more complex than the Jewish/Gentile dichotomy allows. What does it mean for Josephus to publish a work like the *Antiquities* in the literary and political context of Flavian Rome? Does Josephus utilize ironic misdirection and figured speech in his work? For Mason, any attempt to understand Josephus as an author must take these questions into consideration. When reading Josephus we should be constantly on the alert for the ironic.

On the dramatic level, then, we shall be looking for evidence that Josephus expected his audience to understand more than he explicitly said, where this ‘more’ stands in some tension with the facile sense of the voices in his narrative.²⁶

Mason holds, furthermore, that irony can function in two ways: text-dependent and audience-dependent. In text-dependent irony “the author furnishes the audience with the necessary information in some other place, outside the ironic episode itself.”²⁷ The alternative form is much more

²³ Ibid., 247.

²⁴ Ibid., 248.

²⁵ Mason, “Flavius Josephus in Flavian Rome,” 589.

²⁶ Mason, “Figured Speech,” 249.

²⁷ Ibid., 250.

speculative. With audience-dependent irony the author must assume that the audience “already possesses the extra-textual resources that they need in order to close the circuit.”²⁸ In Josephus’ approach to the story of Babel, we will look mainly at examples of the former.²⁹ Josephus is likely writing under both literary and political constraints in his production of the *Antiquities*. These constraints relate closely to the intended audience(s) of his work. While the outward form of the *Antiquities* is clearly aimed at a Gentile audience, there is a high degree of possibility that Josephus was also seeking to communicate to a Jewish audience. For my purposes, I have chosen to speak of Josephus’ presentation of biblical material to this double-audience as his Babelian hermeneutic: Josephus is not saying one thing and meaning another, he is saying one thing and meaning two.

3. *Josephus Reads and Rewrites Babel*

Let us now turn to an initial reading of Josephus’ presentation of Babel. The first order of business is to provide a descriptive account of the actual departures and differences present between the biblical text and Josephus’ re-telling.³⁰ After noting these differences, I will turn my attention to the cultural background(s) against which Josephus is rewriting the tower narrative. In the language of translation studies, I will be exploring the *receptor* or *target* language just as closely as the base text was explored in Part I. Insight

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ As stated above, audience-dependent irony is much more speculative. It also grants a higher degree of interpretive power to the audience. Mason claims that “in the absence of obvious clues, it was always possible that an audience’s determination to discover topical allusion would itself generate subversive interpretations that had never been intended” (Mason, “Figured Speech,” 251). For this reason, I have chosen to focus primary attention on text-dependent forms of irony.

³⁰ Sabrina Inowlocki has published a fascinating article on Josephus and the Tower of Babel. In short, we agreed not only in content but marshal much of the same evidence in our respective readings of Josephus and Babel; see Sabrina Inowlocki, “Josephus’ Rewriting of the Babel Narrative (Gen 11:1–9),” *JSJ* 37 (2006): 169–191. I have attempted to take advantage of Inowlocki’s insights, marking points where we agree and highlighting material where one of us makes a special contribution to the understanding of Josephus’ Babel. Prior to Inowlocki’s article, Josephus’ presentation of the narrative of the Tower of Babel had somehow been largely ignored in the prolific secondary literature. Until a short time ago, the last sustained discussions of the text were Thomas W. Franxman, *Genesis and the Jewish Antiquities of Flavius Josephus* (BibOr 35; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1979), 94–100 and the discussion found in C. Uehlinger, *Weltreich und ‘eine Rede’: Eine neue bedeutung der sogenannten Turmbauerzählung* (OBO 101; Freiburg, Schweiz: Unviersitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 126–133.

from the field of translation studies is particularly useful here. Passage from one language to another is never a simple matter. Translation theorist André Lefevere reminds us of the formative and interpretive influence that terminology itself can serve in the transition of a text from one language to another.

Going beyond authorial intention, [there] might be new possibilities that [the author's] own language would not admit but that are instilled in the new text by the structure of the target language.³¹

Texts, once translated, move in a different linguistic and cultural milieu. The connotations of a new language are able to produce different meanings in the translated text—far beyond the imagination of the original author or possibilities of the original language. Another theorist describes the process using a metaphor of financial transaction. Chaudhuri asserts that “what the translator performs ... is to draw ... upon the funds of another language bank, set up a joint venture with another cultural corporation.”³² This sounds like a perfect description for what Josephus is doing in his *Antiquities*. He brings both the linguistic and connotative force of the Greek language to bear upon the biblical stories he relates. It is, in fact, the ‘funds’ which the Greek ‘language bank’ bring to the re-presentation of Babel with which I am most interested. Of great importance will be an exploration of Greek notions concerning the postdiluvian period, the importation of political language and Greco-Roman discourse concerning colonization. This exploration will provide us with an idea of how a Hellenistic audience might have experienced Josephus’ account of the Tower of Babel. At the same time, I will argue that Josephus was also attempting to communicate a particular message to his co-religionists. I will speculate as to why Josephus would present the characters of the Tower of Babel narrative in a somewhat sympathetic light. If Josephus chooses to read Gen 11 with an eye towards exculpating the tower builders, what are his motivations for such a presentation? It is to Josephus’ rewritten Babel that we now turn.

Οἱ δὲ Νώχου παῖδες τρεῖς ὄντες, Σήμας καὶ Ἰάφθας καὶ Χάμας, ἔτεσιν ἑκατὸν ἔμπροσθεν τῆς ἐποβρίας γεγόντες, πρῶτοι κατελθόντες ἀπὸ τῶν ὀρῶν εἰς τὰ πεδία τὴν ἐν τούτοις οἴκησιν ἐποίησαντο καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους σφόδρα δεδιότας διὰ τὸν καταλυσμὸν τὰ πεδία καὶ ὀκνηρῶς ἔχοντας πρὸς τὴν ἀπὸ τῶν ὑψηλῶν τόπων κατάβασιν ἔπεισαν θαρσύναντας μιμητὰς αὐτῶν γενέσθαι.

³¹ Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, 13.

³² Sukanta Chaudhuri, *Translation and Understanding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10.

καὶ τὸ μὲν πεδίον, εἰς ὃ πρῶτον αὐτοὶ κατώκησαν, καλεῖται Σενάαρ τοῦ δὲ Θεοῦ κελεύσαντος αὐτοὺς διὰ πολυανθρωπίαν στέλλειν ἀποικίας, ἵνα μὴ στασιάζοιεν πρὸς ἀλλήλους, ἀλλὰ γῆν πολλὴν γεωργοῦντες ἀφθονίας ἀπολαύοιεν τῶν καρπῶν, ὑπὸ ἀμαθίας παρήκουσαν τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τοῦτο συμφοραῖς περιπεσόντες ἤσθοντο τῆς ἀμαρτίας ... ἐπεὶ γὰρ ἦνθουν νεότητος πλήθει πάλιν ὁ Θεὸς αὐτοῖς συνεβούλευσε ποιῆσθαι τὴν ἀποικίαν. Οἱ δὲ οὐ κατὰ τὴν εὐμένειαν τὴν ἐκείνου νομίζοντες ἔχειν τὰ ἀγαθὰ, τὴν δ' ἰσχύον αὐτοῖς τὴν οἰκείαν αἰτίαν τῆς εὐπορίας ὑπολαμβάνοντες οὐκ ἐπείθοντο. Προσετίθεσαν δὲ τῷ παρακούειν τῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ γνώμης καὶ τὸ κατ' ἐπιβουλὴν ὑπονοεῖν εἰς ἀποικίαν αὐτοὺς παρορμᾶν, ἵνα διαιρεθέντες εὐεπιχειρητότεροι γένωνται.

109. The sons of Nochos, being three, Semas and Iaphthas and Chamas, who were born a hundred years before the Flood, were the first who came down from the mountains into the plains and made their dwelling there. And they persuaded the others who were very much afraid because of the deluge and who were hesitant to descend from the lofty places to take courage and to follow their examples.

110. The plain that they first inhabited is called Senaar. When God bade them, because of their large population, to send colonies, in order that they might not engage in civil strife with one another, but cultivating much of the soil they might enjoy its fruits, they did not listen to God owing to their ignorance, and therefore, falling into misfortunes, they came to realize their error.

111. For when they flourished with a multitude of young people, God again advised them to establish a colony. But they, not realizing their blessings were due to His favor and supposing that their own might was the reason for their prosperity, did not obey.

112. And to this disobedience to God's will they added the suspicion that He was encouraging them with malicious intent to emigrate in order that being scattered they might more easily be assailed.

From a broad perspective, we should note that Josephus (in a manner similar to Pseudo-Philo) presents the story of Babel as a digression within a longer account of Noah, the flood and the peopling of the world by the spread of the children of Noah.³³ This is the larger context in which Josephus' story is narrated. One of the most profound alterations is Josephus' decision to re-arrange the canonical placement of the biblical narrative of the tower. Josephus is certainly not alone in his decision to place the account of Babel before the Table of Nations. We saw above that many modern scholars, as well as ancient interpreters, have also been uncomfortable with the canonical arrangement and have sought different ways in which to explain

³³ For a discussion of the image of Noah in the *Antiquities*, see Louis H. Feldman, "Noah," in *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible* (JJSup 58; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 17–37.

the biblical order. By placing the Table of Nations *after* the account of the tower, Josephus removes the contradiction present between Gen 10 and Gen 11. There is now only one story which deals with the multiplication of languages and the dispersal of postdiluvian humanity. More importantly, however, Josephus creates narrative continuity between the story of the Flood and the Babel narrative. As we will see below, the two stories must now be read in conjunction with each other. This juxtaposition will be enormously productive for Josephus' reading of the Tower of Babel.

Josephus opens his account of Babel with the claim that postdiluvian humanity was fearful to descend from the mountains where they were dwelling.

And (the sons of Noah) persuaded the others who were very much afraid because of the deluge and who were hesitant to descend from the lofty place to take courage and to follow their example. (A.J. 1.109)

Uehlinger's characterization is evocative: he speaks of "die Angst der Menschen vor einer neuen Flut."³⁴ The influence of anxiety is important for Josephus' reading of Babel. There is a great deal which is being imported here by Josephus. According to the biblical text, there were only a few survivors of the great flood: Noah, his wife, his three sons and their families. In the Josephan version, there appear to be many more people involved. The sons of Noah were not the only survivors in this version; they were, however, those most willing to descend from the protection of the mountains and begin the process of resettling the land. Josephus does not comment on *why* the sons of Noah were willing to descend to the plains. We may infer, however, that Noah and his sons trusted the postdiluvian divine promise:

But I will cease in the future to punish crimes with such wrath and more especially since you call upon Me. And if ever I should raise a storm to a greater degree, do not fear the magnitude of the rains. For never again will water inundate the earth. (A.J. 1.101)

The Josephan version of the promise not to destroy the world again by floodwaters is not substantively different from the biblical version in Gen 8:21–22. It does explain, however, why the sons of Noah were not afraid to leave the safety of the mountaintops. Characterization, therefore, is central to Josephus' introduction to the Tower of Babel. "The whole earth" of Gen 11:1 is here defined explicitly as the named sons of Noah and the un-named, fearful, others who must be convinced to descend. While Pseudo-Philo

³⁴ C. Uehlinger, *Weltreich und 'Eine Rede'*, 128.

(and, as we shall see, the author of *3Baruch*) makes a division based on the oppressed/oppressor dichotomy, Josephus focuses on the element of belief/disbelief in the ultimate goodness of the promises of God. Unlike its biblical progenitor, Josephus' account of Babel does not hang in mid-air, without narrative context. We now know where the people were prior to their arrival at the plain of Shinar and why they were in the process of migrating. We also know their mental disposition. Josephus provides us with this deep background.

Josephus continues to paint a canvas against which the story of Babel should be viewed. After settling on the plain of Shinar, the deity intervenes by encouraging the peoples to colonize the land. The stated goal is a divine desire for humans to avoid warfare. Because of the enormous number of people present on the plain, the deity knows the result will be that the peoples will begin to fight with one another (ἵνα μὴ στασιάζοιεν πρὸς ἀλλήλους). This particular theme has already been encountered in Pseudo-Philo's rewriting of Babel: increased population leads to increased animosity between people. The divine, aware of the coming danger, seeks the welfare of the people. It is noteworthy that in Josephus it is God who is fearful of future hostility amongst humans, while the author of Pseudo-Philo places such fear as the motivating factor for the Babelties' actions. Additionally, if the people colonize the land, there will be plenty of room to engage in agriculture. In this regard, Josephus is providing a rationale for the actions of God by introducing God as a character earlier in the account. God is present from the very beginning and, moreover, is seeking the welfare of the people. God is proactive, not reactive, for Josephus.³⁵ There is a corollary of this divine presence at the beginning of the Josephan narrative. The question of sin at Babel is answered; the exact motivation for the builders of the tower is spelled out clearly. According to Inowlocki:

Josephus' interpretation of Babel also presents a different structure from that of Genesis. Genesis 11 displays a binary structure: the human sin is followed by the divine punishment. On the contrary, Josephus proposes a ternary structure: a divine command, twice asserted, is followed by human disobedience, which itself generated divine punishment. The motif of disobedience becomes central in Josephus, which is not explicitly the case in Genesis.³⁶

³⁵ As we saw above, modern commentators have made similar moves in their attempt to make the divine an active (as opposed to a re-active) character in the story. The sin of Babel is often seen as the failure of the people to fulfill the divine blessing given at creation and again after the flood (Gen 1:26 and 9:1).

³⁶ Inowlocki, "Josephus' Rewriting of the Babel Narrative," 172–173.

The form of rebellion and disobedience, however, is culturally specific. Josephus twice highlights the divine command to send out colonies (στέλλειν ἀποικίας). The people refuse the first time due to their ignorance which leads directly to sin. In the second instance, however, Josephus explains further why the people fail to heed the command. "But they, not realizing that their blessings were due to his favor and supposing that their own might was the reason of their prosperity, did not obey" (*A.J.* 1.111). Here is a major addition to the biblical narrative. First, the biblical text tells us nothing of the tower builders' fortune or might. The biblical account simply focuses on the people's desire to remain together in one place (avoid scattering) and to make a name. Josephus has translated these desires into an example of self-assurance and arrogance. The people have forgotten the true source of their prosperity. There is also the notion of generational change, which is absent from the biblical text. "For when they flourished with a multitude of young people, God again advised them to establish a colony" (*A.J.* 1.111). The people are given two chances to obey the divine. They fail both times. Inowlocki is certainly correct to suggest that "Josephus may have modified God's role in Babel for apologetic reasons. Indeed, Gen 11 provides readers with the portrayal of a cruel God, punishing his creatures for unclear reasons."³⁷ Josephus' insistence that God was only seeking the welfare of the Babelites argues against a less flattering and more capricious interpretation of the deity's actions. God has blessed the Babelites and, through colonization, wishes to continue blessing them.

The situation is even direr, however. The people have not simply misjudged the source of their prosperity—they have become openly suspicious of the divine and his motives. The people become convinced that God, rather than seeking their welfare, is attempting to separate them into smaller and smaller groups so that they might more easily be attacked. These two rationales for the disobedience of the builders do not entirely cohere. The second reason actually echoes (and intensifies) the original postdiluvian fear of the survivors of the flood. The people, despite their growth and prosperity, are still terrified that the deity will seek to destroy them. Divine postdiluvian blessing does not dispel the horror of divine genocide easily. This recollection of the initial fear qualifies the first reason given by Josephus for the people's failure to colonize: the people are accused of arrogance and hubris in one breath, while Josephus reminds us of the people's fear in

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 173. I would argue, of course, that Gen 11 presents readers a more ambiguous image of the divine.

the next. It is clear, I think, that Josephus *does condemn* the Babelites for disobeying the divine. At the same moment, I also believe he allows for a sympathetic interpretation of their situation. I will argue below that this two-fold approach may speak to the historical reality of Josephus.

Ἐξήρῃ τε αὐτοὺς πρὸς τε ὕβριν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ καταφρόνησιν Νεβρώδης, ὃς υἱωνὸς μὲν ἦν Χάμου τοῦ Νώχου, τολμηρὸς δὲ καὶ κατὰ χεῖρα γενναῖος. ἰδίαν ἀρετὴν ταῦτα παρέχειν αὐτοῖς ἡγείσθαι, καὶ περιστά δὲ κατ' ὀλίγον εἰς τυραννίδα τὰ πράγματα, μόνως οὕτως νομίζων ἀποστήσειν τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τοῦ φόβου τοῦ παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ, εἰ χρώμενοι τῇ αὐτοῦ δυνάμει διατελοῖεν, ἀμυνεῖσθαι τε τὸν Θεὸν πάλιν ἡπείλει τὴν γῆν ἐπικλύσαι θελήσαντα πύργον γὰρ οἰκοδομήσειν ὑψηλότερον ἢ τὸ ὕδωρ ἀναβῆναι δυνηθεῖν, μετελεύσεσθαι δὲ καὶ τῆς τῶν προγόνων ἀπωλείας.

Τὸ δὲ πλῆθος πρόθυμον ἦν τοῖς Νεβώδου ἐπεσθαι δόγμασι δουλείαν ἡγούμενοι τὸ εἶκιν τῷ θεῷ, καὶ τὸν πύργον ὠκοδόμουν οὐδὲν ἀπολείποντες σπουδῆς οὐδὲ πρὸς τὸ ἔργον ὀκνηρῶς ἔχοντες ἐλάμβανε δὲ θάττον ὕψος ἢ προσεδόκησεν ἂν τις ὑπὸ πολυχειρίας τὸ μέντοι πάχος ἦν ἰσχυρὸν τοσοῦτον ὥσθ' ὑπ' αὐτοῦ μειοῦσθαι τοῖς ὁρώσι τὸ μήκος

ὠκοδομεῖτο δὲ ἐκ πλίνθου ὀπτῆς ἀσφάλτῳ συνδεδεμένης ὡς ἂν μὴ περιρρέοι οὕτως δὲ μεμηνότας αὐτοὺς ὁρών

113. Nebrodes, who was the son of Chamas, the son of Nochos, raised them to insolence and contempt of God (ὕβριν τοῦ θεοῦ). He was bold and physically brave. Now he persuaded them not to attribute their prosperity to God but to consider that their own virtue brought this to them.

114. And little by little he transformed the state of affairs into a tyranny, believing that only thus would men be free of the fear of God if they would continue to use their own power; and he kept on threatening that he would take revenge on God if He wished to flood the earth again. For he would build a tower higher than the water could reach and he would execute vengeance also for the destruction of his forefathers.

115. The masses were eager to follow the views of Nebrodes, considering it slavery to submit to God. And they began to build a tower omitting nothing of the zeal nor showing hesitancy in doing the work. And, owing to the great number of laborers, it reached a height more swiftly than anyone might have expected.

116a. However, its thickness was so strong that its height appeared less to those who saw it. It was built of baked brick bound together with bitumen, in order that it might not collapse.

The introduction of Nimrod is certainly not a unique component to Josephus' version of the Tower of Babel.³⁸ Nimrod is present in other early Jewish

³⁸ An overview of the character of Nimrod in Jewish interpretive literature is presented

retellings of the story. In comparison with the role of Nimrod in Pseudo-Philo, however, Nimrod takes on a central role for Josephus. As we saw above, it was quite easy to import Nimrod as the villain of Babel. Our concern, however, is with the specific use made of Nimrod by Josephus. Josephus first points to the lineage of Nimrod—he is a son of Ham. He is, furthermore, portrayed as the instigator of an underlying change in the disposition of the people. It was Nimrod who caused the people to exhibit hubris and contempt towards the divine.³⁹ This assertion is somewhat odd, given that we have just been told immediately before the introduction of Nimrod that the people had already disobeyed God by attributing their good fortune to their own strength.

Josephus makes clear use of political language in his discussion of Nimrod. After leading the people into *hubris*, Nimrod converts the government into *tyranny*. We are not told what previous form of government might have obtained at Shinar. The function of this shift in political constitution was to remove the fear of God from the people: "... only thus would men be free of fear of God if they would continue to use their own power" (*A.J.* 1.114). It is ironic that Nimrod attempts to free the people of the fear of God by terrifying the people concerning the future actions of God: "He kept on threatening that he would take revenge on God if He wished to flood the earth again" (*A.J.* 1.114). I will argue below that Josephus utilizes the language of tyranny to remove some culpability from the people themselves for the events about to happen. While Josephus never explicitly claims that Nimrod forces the population to engage in the building of the tower (in fact, Josephus states that the people were eager to follow the plan of the tyrant Nimrod) the following story of the building of the Tower of Babel will now be qualified by an air of potential compulsion and coercion. It is Nimrod who takes center stage. Nimrod threatens God. Gone is the instinctive univocal assertion of the people—it is replaced with the commanding voice of a dictator who has led the people astray and horrified them with visions of another deluge. Furthermore, the purpose of the tower is presented as two-fold. It is both an offensive and a defensive structure. Nimrod justifies the building of the tower to the Babelites by reminding them of the flood; catastrophe is catalyst for a descent into rebellion and tyranny. This is the third reference to human fear of the divine in a very short space.

in K. van der Toorn and P.W. van der Horst, "Nimrod Before and After the Bible," *HTR* 83 (1990):1–29.

³⁹ For a discussion of hubris in Josephus' work, see Daniel B. Levine, "*Hubris* in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* 1–4," *HUCA* 64 (1993): 51–87. See also the discussion below.

ὁ θεὸς ἀφανίσαι μὲν ἐκ παντὸς οὐκ ἔκρινεν, ὅτι μὴδ' ὑπὸ τῶν πρώτων ἀπολωλότων σωφρονισθεῖεν, εἰς στάσιν δὲ αὐτοὺς ἐνέβαλεν ἀλλογλώσσους ἀπεργάσαμενος καὶ ὑπὸ πολυφωνίας ποιήσας ἐαυτῶν ἀσυνέτους εἶναι. ὁ δὲ τόπος ἐν ᾧ τὸν πύργον ᾠκοδόμησαν νῦν Βαβυλῶν καλεῖται διὰ τὴν σύγχυσιν τοῦ περὶ τὴν διάλεκτον πρώτων ἐναργούς. Ἑβραῖοι γὰρ τὴν σύγχυσιν βαβέλ καλοῦσι. Περὶ δὲ τοῦ πύργου τούτου καὶ τῆς ἀλλοφωνίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων μέμνηται καὶ Σίβυλλα λέγουσα οὕτως πάντων ὁμοφώνων ὄντων τῶν ἀνθρώπων πύργον ᾠκοδομήσαντινες ὑψηλότατον ὡς ἐπὶ τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀναβησόμενοι δι' αὐτοῦ οἱ δὲ θεοὶ ἀνέμους ἐπιπέμψαντες ἀνέτρεψαν τὸν πύργον καὶ ἰδίαν ἐκάστῳ φωνὴν ἔδωκαν καὶ διὰ τοῦτο Βαβυλῶνα συνέβη κληθῆναι τὴν πόλιν

περὶ δὲ τοῦ πεδίου τοῦ λεγομένου Σενάαρ ἐν τῇ Βαβυλωνίᾳ χώρα μνημονεύει Ἑστιαῖος λέγων οὕτως τῶν δὲ ἱερέων τοὺς διασωθέντας τὰ τοῦ Ἑνναλίου Διὸς ἱερώματα λαβόντες εἰς Σενάαρ τῆς Βαβυλωνίας ἐλθεῖν

116b. Seeing them thus out of their mind, God decided not to obliterate them utterly because they had not even been brought to their senses by those who had first perished,

117. but cast them into factional strife by causing them to speak various languages and causing them not to understand themselves owing to the variety of languages. The place in which they built the tower is now called Babylon because of the confusion in the original clarity of language. For the Hebrews call confusion, “Babel.”

118. A Sybil also mentions this tower and the difference of languages of men in the following words: “When all men spoke the same language, certain ones built a very lofty tower in order thereby to go up to heaven. But the gods sent winds and overthrew the tower and gave each one an individual speech. And for this reason it happened that the city was called Babylon.”

119. And Hestiaios mentions the plain that is called Senaar in the land of Babylonia in these words: “Those of the priests who were saved took the consecrated objects of Zeus Enyalios and went to Senaar in Babylonia.”

The divine response in Josephus is very different from the biblical version. There is no hint of divine limitation with regard to sovereignty or knowledge. God does not consult with anyone or attempt to investigate the situation; he simply acts. But what action does the divine take? Josephus implies that God might have completely destroyed the people for this latest outrage, but “seeing them thus out of their mind, God decided not to obliterate them utterly because they had not even been brought to their senses by those who had first perished” (*A.J.* 1.116).⁴⁰ There are two elements to highlight here.

⁴⁰ The reference to the Babelites as being “out of their mind,” resonates with the language of Exod 32:25 where Moses sees the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf and determines they are “out of control”—since Aaron had let them get out of control.” We noted above

Josephus maintains (obliquely) that the proper punishment for the 'sin' of the builders should be destruction; God is gracious, however. More interesting, Josephus stresses that divine punishment may sometimes be pedagogical rather than punitive. In point of fact, the tower builders should have learned something from their previous experience with divine chastisement. The survivors of the flood did indeed learn a lesson; it was, however, the wrong lesson. They learned suspicion of the divine rather than how to be obedient to the directives of God. They confused punishment with oppression, destruction with divine desertion.

Josephus concludes his presentation of the tower narrative with two references to external works. The first is to a Sibylline Oracle.⁴¹ According to this source, the intention of the tower builders was to "go up to starry heaven" (*AJ.* 1.118). The citation of the oracle serves as validation to a Greek audience of the authenticity and historicity of what Moses recorded in the Pentateuch, as the Sibyl was a widely known figure in Greek and Roman antiquity. J. Collins states that:

the sibyl was an ecstatic woman who uttered prophecies of a predominately gloomy nature. This phenomenon was certainly known in the Greek world from very early times.⁴²

Collins dates the *Third Sibylline Oracle* sometime between 163–145 BCE and views it as a product of the Jewish Egyptian diaspora. Josephus, therefore, quotes a Jewish imitation of a Greek oracular form to validate the accuracy of his account to a Greek and Roman audience.⁴³ The other source

(Chapter Four) that Pseudo-Philo had made an explicit connection between the Babelites and the Israelite apostasy at Sinai. Josephus does not discuss the incident of the Golden Calf. Later rabbinic texts will play on the meaning of the Hebrew word מִקְדָּשׁ in Gen 11:2 to suggest that the Babelites had turned their mental faculties away from the divine before they begin their construction project (see Chapter Eight, below).

⁴¹ Feldman assumes here that Josephus is referencing the *Third Sibylline Oracle* 3:97–104. For a discussion of the *Sibylline Oracles*, see John J. Collins, *The Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism* (SBLDS 13; Missoula, Mont.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972). A more recent analysis can be found in Riuewerd Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles and its Social Setting: With an Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (SVTP 17; Leiden: Brill, 2003). For an overview of material in the *Sibylline Oracles* related to the narrative of Babel, see Uehlinger, *Weltreich und 'Eine Rede'*, 138–142.

⁴² Collins, *The Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism*, 1.

⁴³ There has been a good amount of debate as to whether or not the material related to the tower in the *Third Sibylline Oracle* is ultimately of Jewish origin. Collins states that "the description of the fall of the tower of Babylon and the 'euhemeristic' account of the gods which followed it have long been considered a fragment of the Chaldean sibyl" (Collins, *The Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism*, 25). He holds that most scholars today (although he is

he quotes is Hestaios (Ἑστιαῖος), the author of another work of apologetic historiography, whom he mentions in *Antiquities* in connection with the more famous Manetho and Berosos.

All those who have written ancient histories among Greeks and barbarians bear witness to my account. For Manetho, who has composed the records of the Egyptians, and Berosos, who composed that that concerned the Chaldeans, and Mochos and Hestaios and, in addition to these, the Egyptian Hieronymos, who composed that that concerns the Phoenicians, agree with what I have said.⁴⁴ (A.J. 1.107–108)

By appealing both to the Sibylline and well-known historians, Josephus is attempting to ground the narrative of Babel by means of two canons of truth in Greco-Roman antiquity—historical writings and oracular literature. The Torah of Moses is an embodiment of both forms of cultural memory and tradition for Josephus. Indeed, the Torah of Moses contains the original narrative of the tower of Shinar which is only obliquely remembered and alluded to by these later oracular and historical sources.

In conclusion, Josephus alters the account of Babel mainly through the rearrangement of the biblical text to allow for a broader narrative context and by the introduction of characters (the fearful masses and Nimrod) and their various motivations for the building of the tower. The deity, in contrast to the biblical version, makes several attempts to encourage the people to leave the plain of Shinar and found colonies. It is only after the people refuse repeated divine entreaties and fall under the sway of the tyrant Nimrod that the deity finally intervenes forcefully. Even in this instance, however, the people are treated compassionately. From the divine perspective, the people have learned nothing from the flood and their disobedience is due to ignorance. They are simply out of their mind.

writing in 1972), however, would view the material related to the tower narrative as deriving from a Jewish source. “The passage is at least influence by the Jewish biblical account of the fall of the tower,” says Collins, “and is paralleled in Jewish Hellenistic writing. It must be seen in the context of other attempts by Jewish Hellenistic authors of the second century BC to fuse biblical and pagan accounts of ancient history” (Collins, *The Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism*, 26).

⁴⁴ Feldman notes that “this Phoenician historian is otherwise unknown” (Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, 38, n. 264). The fact that Josephus is referencing an unknown historian highlights the rhetorical move by Josephus: it is more important to *assert* that your presentation is validated by non-Jewish sources than it is to actually produce those sources and *demonstrate* that your arguments are validated. The continuation of this passage draws a parallel between the native historians and Greek authors such as Hesiod.

4. *Babel as Greek Political Myth*

Inowlocki has pointed to a general tendency on the part of Josephus to treat biblical narrative as political metaphor. She states that “it should be noted that Josephus generally tends to politicize the biblical narrative in his *Antiquities*.”⁴⁵ It should not be surprising then to suggest that Josephus presents Babel according to political language well-known in the ancient world. Inowlocki, in fact, refers to Babel consistently as a “political myth.” But political language has multiple constituencies. We mentioned above that one of Josephus’ audiences (perhaps his primary one) was Roman, a readership that would have been culturally fluent with a number of classical texts. In what follows, we explore in more depth the Greek and Roman background of Josephus’ version of Babel. There are a number of instances where Josephus has clearly imported Greek and Roman literary sources and notions in his rewriting of the tower narrative: (1) Greek notions of the postdiluvian period, (2) debates surrounding the best form of governance and the ever-present problem of tyranny and hubris, (3) the rhetoric of colonization and political factionalism (στάσις).⁴⁶ The central issue explored in this section is how the narrative of Babel sounds when translated into Greek and Roman cultural and political language. The final section of the chapter will examine many of the same issues from a native Judean perspective.

4.1. *After the Flood*

Turning first to Greek notions of the postdiluvian period, one of the major alterations made to the narrative of Babel by Josephus is the introduction of an un-named group of survivors of the flood. These survivors are traumatized by the deluge and do not wish to leave the safety of the mountains. Is this simple literary creation on the part of Josephus? Greek traditions of a cataclysmic flood are scattered across a large corpus of Greek literature. The ‘Noah’ of these Greek flood stories is Deucalion. Feldman has made a case that Josephus intended his Gentile audience to equate the biblical Noah with Deucalion through the use of the term *λάρνακα* for Noah’s ark. Feldman claims that:

⁴⁵ Inowlocki, “Josephus’ Rewriting of the Babel Narrative,” 181.

⁴⁶ A thorough analysis of the language of political factionalism (στάσις) can be found in Gottfried Mader, *Josephus and the Politics of Historiography: Apologetic and Impression Management in the Bellum Iudaicum* (Mnemosyne Sup 215; Leiden: Brill, 2000).

Josephus was, indeed, thinking of Deucalion ... indicated by the fact that the word which Josephus uses for Noah's ark is the same word which is used by Apollodorus (1.7.2), by Lucian (*De Dea Syria* 12), and by Josephus' contemporary Plutarch (13.968F), in connection with the ark of Deucalion, rather than the word employed by the Septuagint (καίβωτός) and by Philo.⁴⁷

Feldman, furthermore, has suggested that Plato offers an interesting literary parallel to Josephus' image of post-Flood humanity. In *The Laws*, Plato claims that, following the deluge, "small sparks of the human race (were) preserved on the tops of mountains." It was this group of

hill shepherds ... (who) managed to escape the Flood, and ... since the cities in the plain and on the seacoast were utterly destroyed they feared to descend from the heights into the plains.⁴⁸

Josephus, therefore, is presenting the survivors of the biblical deluge in language which would have been familiar to his initial audience. He also exploits the Platonic notion of postdiluvian fear to provide the beginnings of a rationalization for the builders of the tower. Reading with Hellenistic eyes, we might even suggest that the fear of postdiluvian humanity was a reasonable and justifiable one. The Babelites, in light of the continuing passage in *The Laws*, are presented in infantilizing language. The image of post-flood humanity in Plato is clear:

And of course men like these were bound to be unfamiliar with the crafts at large and, above all, with the tricks of town-dwellers for overreaching and outdistancing one another and the rest of their devices for mutual infliction of mischief.⁴⁹

The image presented here is of a primitive humanity bereft of art and technology, but also strongly unified in their pursuit of survival.

The main distinction between the sons of Noah and the other survivors of the Flood was a belief on the part of Noah's sons in a divine promise not to destroy the world again by water. Is Josephus then suggesting a lack of faith on the part of the Babelites? Plato again provides another clue as to how

⁴⁷ Feldman, "Noah," 28. Feldman assumes here that Josephus' choice of different terminology is a conscious rejection of the terms used by other Jewish authors of the same period, rather than a simple stylistic choice. Such an argument from silence should be seen for what it is.

⁴⁸ *Leg.* 3.677B1–3. Feldman, "Noah," 37.

⁴⁹ *Leg.* 3.677E. Translation by A.E. Taylor, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters* (ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns; Bollingen Series 71; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

a Greco-Roman audience might have heard Josephus' Babel account. The philosopher transmits a tradition of two separate destructions: he speaks of one by fire and one by water.

There have been, and will be again, many destructions of mankind arising out of many causes; the greatest have been brought about by the agencies of fire and water, and other lesser ones by innumerable causes.⁵⁰

These catastrophic events are what make connections between ages of civilization impossible; all knowledge is lost in these events (recall the passage from *The Laws*). Civilization continuously crumbles. The tradition, furthermore, is echoed in the *Antiquities*. Josephus claims that "Adam ... predicted that there would be an extermination of the universe, at one time by a violent fire and at another by a force with an abundance of water" (*A.J.* 1.70).⁵¹ To a Greek audience familiar with these cultural traditions, the fear of the postdiluvians is, once again, not only understandable but justifiable. The status of the *Timaeus* during the Hellenistic period bolsters the claim being made here. D. Runia has argued that:

it would be a serious mistake ... to conclude that the *Timaeus* was only read and studied by professional philosophers or students of philosophy. The very fact that it was regarded as the 'Platonists' Bible' meant that its influence inevitably filtered down to men of letters and even to those who had received a smattering of learning. Indeed the *Timaeus* was the only Greek prose work that up to the third century AD every educated man could be assumed to have read.⁵²

Josephus, therefore, could have counted on his audience grasping the intensity and legitimacy of the fear of the Babelites.⁵³

The Platonic passage is a reference, not only to destruction by water and by fire, but to a cyclical pattern of destructions by flood and other catastrophic events. Part of the deep background of the passage seems to be the Greek notion of successive ages of humanity, dating back at least to the *Theogony* of Hesiod. Each age ended in the destruction of a race of human

⁵⁰ *Tim.* 23b–c. Translation by Benjamin Jowett in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*.

⁵¹ It is worth noting that in both the biblical text and the Josephan rewrite the deity promises only not to utilize water as the instrument of destruction—leaving open the divine prerogative to utilize other means.

⁵² David Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (Amsterdam: VU Boekhandel, 1983), 57.

⁵³ One might object that the Babelites in Josephus are afraid of another Flood, not consummation by fire.

beings and the creation of a correspondingly lesser humanity.⁵⁴ For the survivors of the biblical Flood, in light of such cultural traditions, what possible assurance could there be that another flood was not imminent? Why should any divine assurances be trusted in the face of traditions of oscillating creation and annihilation? These Greek cultural traditions about the post-Flood period work together, I would argue, to provide the possibility of a sympathetic reading of the Babel narrative by a Greco-Roman audience. Those who survived the great Flood were understandably traumatized by the event and could be expected to take every conceivable precaution to avoid future destruction. This sympathy—not explicitly present in the narrative of Josephus, but present at the level of cultural-background—will be important for understanding the political implications of his rewriting of Babel below.

4.2. *Nimrod the Tyrant*

As has already been mentioned, the importation of the character of Nimrod is not a unique interpretive move on the part of Josephus. Nimrod is central in many ancient Jewish interpretations of Babel. Josephus, however, makes use of very specific language—language which would have been widely familiar in the Greco-Roman world—in his presentation of Nimrod's role in the building of the tower. One important way in which Josephus rewrites the tower narrative is as an example of political life gone awry. Greek political thought focused a great deal of attention on the proper nature of the *polis*. The Babelites, after all, are attempting to construct not only a tower but also the first postdiluvian *polis* from a Greek perspective. Philosophical enquiry about the nature of the *polis* went back at least to Plato who sets forth his ideal *polis*, complete with a Philosopher King, in *The Republic*. In Book IX of his work, Plato discusses progressive degeneration from his Ideal State: Timarchy, Oligarchy and Democracy are all imperfect forms of government that eventuate in the appearance of Tyranny.

For Plato, tyranny is a natural outgrowth of democracy, which, by its very nature is an unstable political system. In order to gain power initially, the would-be tyrant must submit to the will of that portion of the population

⁵⁴ For an examination of the notion of successive ages of humanity and Josephus' narration of the Primeval History in Genesis, see Louis Feldman, "Man's Decline After Creation," in *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible* (JSJSup 58; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 1–16. Originally published as "Hellenizations in Josephus' Account of Man's Decline," in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough* (ed. Jacob Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1968), 336–353.

which is in the majority. The future tyrant begins his career as a demagogic 'crowd pleaser.' Political theorist J.S. McClellan presents the matter thusly:

Democratic politicians have to listen to the crowd in the assembly bawling for what it wants. The only way the demagogues would know what to do in these circumstances would be to give in to the section of the crowd which shouted the loudest or to give the crowd what it shouted the loudest for.⁵⁵

Because the tyrant begins his career satisfying the wants and desires of the crowd, he is equally ready to satisfy his own desires.

Viewing Nimrod as an example of a tyrant—according to Plato's criteria—also explains some of the literary unevenness of Josephus' rewriting of the tower. I noted above that the hubris of the Babelites was initially credited to their account and subsequently to Nimrod. Josephus' presentation of Nimrod is interesting in this regard. There are two areas in which Nimrod is well-attuned to the people's desires. He both mirrors back to the people their own estimation of their virtue *and* echoes and amplifies their fear of another deluge brought about by the deity. The people have already failed to understand the true source of their prosperity when Nimrod "raise(s) them to insolence (ὕβρις) and contempt for God." He convinces the people "not to attribute their prosperity to God but to consider that their own virtue brought this to them" (*A.J.* 1.113). In his study of *hubris* in Josephus' *Judean Antiquities*, D. Levine has suggested that the linking of satiety and hubris is a classical one. A number of other biblical narratives are marked by the incorporation of *hubris*.⁵⁶

Nimrod is only repeating to the people what they have already come to believe, confirming the people's assurance in their own self-worth. But he goes one step further: like any good politician, he is carefully attuned to the pressing issues of his day. In the process of transforming the government into a tyranny, Nimrod

⁵⁵ J.S. McClelland, *History of Western Political Thought* (London: Routledge, 1996), 45.

⁵⁶ Levine states that Josephus makes use of the term *hubris* some 184 (or 187) times in the *Judean Antiquities*. Josephus' usage of the term, however, is quite broad. In some instances, *hubris* is linked to sexual depravity. Levine also argues that "the classical notion that an excess of good things leads to satiety (κόρος), which in turn makes one commit acts of insolence (ὕβρις)" is common in Josephus (Levine, "*Hubris* in Josephus," 57). Levine presents the following examples of Josephus' rewriting biblical narratives to include a reference to *hubris*: Cain and his progeny (*A.J.* 1.60–61); the human-divine hybrids alluded to in Gen 6:1–4 (*A.J.* 1.73); Pharaoh's amorous overtures towards Sarah (*A.J.* 1.162–163); the Sodomites (*A.J.* 1.194); Egypt's oppression of Israel (*A.J.* 2.202; 2.268; 4.3; 4.242); the leader of the rebellion in the wilderness, Korah (*A.J.* 4.16); Moses' warning to future generations of the danger of wealth (*A.J.* 4.189).

kept on threatening that he would take revenge on God if He wished to flood the earth again ... he would build a tower higher than the waters could reach and he would execute vengeance also for the destruction of his forefathers.

(A.J. 1.114)

Nimrod has listened well and observed the fears of the people. Initially the people were too timid even to descend from the mountain to the plain, lest they be swept away again by another flood. Following an increase in population and some sense of prosperity, the people refuse to colonize for fear that such advice is a divine ploy and that the deity is only "encouraging them with malicious intent to emigrate in order that being scattered they might more easily be assailed" (A.J. 1.112).

Here Nimrod not only re-iterates the people's fears, he amplifies them. He does so in two distinct ways. He begins by appealing to the understandable sense of self-preservation: the decision to construct a tower is a defensive one. If the deity attempts to flood the earth again, the people will be prepared. They will construct, not an ark, but a tower. This initial motive for building the tower certainly speaks to the people's sense of self-preservation. In this instance, however, rather than simply refusing a divine command to colonize, the people are engaged in *actual rebellion* against the divine through the fortification of their city on the plain. Nimrod goes further, however. The tower is not only to be a defensive structure, but an offensive one. It is not only safety that the tyrant of Shinar seeks. It is, rather, the ability to avenge his forefathers. The motif of war against the heavens, present in a number of other interpretive texts, makes a brief appearance. Here, however, the assault on heaven is portrayed as a human response to previous divine aggression and even as a misguided act of human justice in light of the experience of divine atrocity. The people are only too eager to comply with the wishes of Nimrod. In fact, under the sway of the tyrant, the people "consider it slavery to submit to God." They have submitted, rather, to their own fears as articulated by Nimrod.

What purpose does Josephus' rewriting of Babel in the political language of tyranny serve for Greek and Roman readers? One simple answer would be that Josephus seeks to demonstrate the complete political failure of the first postdiluvian *polis* and its constitution. The failure of Babel and its *polis* may be a counterpoint to the superiority of the Mosaic constitution which will be discussed at length in the sections of the *Antiquities* which follow. There may be something more subtle taking place as well. Tyrants ascend to power and begin their rule by listening carefully to the masses and their desires; they do not remain in power by doing so. After coming to power

The (tyrant) begins to see wherever he looks he is surrounded by real or potential enemies ... It is about time that the demagogue looked to his own safety, so he equips himself with the badge of tyranny, a foreign guard loyal to his own person for pay. The tyrant's guard sees to it that the tyrant can live out in his waking hours the darkest and most repressed wishes of the human soul. Once he has been mastered by them, the tyrant is the most slavish of men and, all other courses of human action now being closed to him, he can only go forward in blood.⁵⁷

All of this is passed over in silence in Josephus. Having made his brief appearance as the instigator of the building program, the tyrant Nimrod disappears from the scene. A question lingers, however, for those familiar with the rise and fall of tyrants as to the actual willingness of all the people to engage in their building program. While Josephus ends the story here, this thread is picked up by other rewriters of the tower narrative. It is possible that Josephus is hinting here at a larger tradition. Finally, I would note, that Josephus' presentation of Babel once again leaves open the possibility of a sympathetic reading of the narrative. Fear of future destruction is joined with the political reality of tyranny and its ability both to seize upon the desires of the masses and then dominate those masses.

4.3. *How Cities Were Founded Long Ago*⁵⁸

Colonization is the perfect image for the way in which Josephus rewrites the Babel story. By utilizing key Greek notions concerning colonization, Josephus makes the narrative understandable in yet another fashion to his Gentile audience. These concepts include the notion of civil strife (στᾶσις) and the intervention of the deity (Apollo/Yahweh) to bring about the establishment of colonies. The biblical narrative is, once again, transformed through its encounter with larger Greek and Roman notions of the colonial enterprise: particularly rhetoric associated with the Greek archaic period. The tower is colonized through this re-casting in colonial language. As with all comparisons, however, there are also notable differences which need to be addressed. Josephus both mimics the rhetoric of colonialism and subtly inverts it.

⁵⁷ McClelland, *History of Western Political Thought*, 46.

⁵⁸ The quote is from Plato's *Hippias Maior* 285d. The text reads: "They delight in the genealogies of heroes and of men and in stories of the foundation of cities in olden times, and, to put it briefly, in all forms of antiquarian lore" (Translated by Benjamin Jowett in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, 1534–1559).

Gregory Sterling has argued that the importation of colonization language by Josephus (both here and with regard to the story of Abraham sending away his children by Keturah in *A.J.* 1:238–239) is an indication of Josephus' familiarity with the *Αἰγυπτιάδα* of Hekataios.⁵⁹ Consistent with his designation of the work as “apologetic historiography,” Sterling views the use of colonization language as a form of cultural polemic, an author attempting to demonstrate the antiquity (and hence superiority) of their particular culture. Sterling's view is worth citing in full.

The significance of the colonization movement is seen in the polemical epilogue to the first example [of Babel]: some of these people still retain their original names, but others have been altered by the Greeks who want to claim that they have descended from them (1.121). This immediately recalls the colonization scene of Hekataios which must have comprised a significant portion of the original work. While Josephus' transformation of these biblical episodes can not be claimed as proof that he knew Hekataios' *Αἰγυπτιάδα* firsthand, the fact that he knew Hekataios' work and the close similarity makes us wonder. At any rate we may affirm that he was *aware of the type of cultural claims* (italics added) made by Hekataios and countered them with assertions of his own.⁶⁰

While I do not disagree with Sterling's analysis, I think there is probably something more taking place in Josephus' evocation of the discourse of colonization. Where Sterling focuses on the possible literary connections between Josephus and Hekataios—certainly a valid approach—I am more concerned with the precise nature of the cultural claims to which Sterling points. Sterling stresses the cultural polemic at the expense of other readings of the text.⁶¹ If we assume that Josephus is attempting to translate the tower into a narrative that would be familiar to a Greek speaking audience, we must concern ourselves with the *discourse* of colonization.

Why would Josephus choose to recast the story of Babel using colonization language? Contra Sterling: Is colonization language *only* about antiquity, a way for Josephus to assert that ‘before Socrates was’ Moses had already been? It is telling that in the above quote from Sterling primary emphasis is placed on the polemical epilogue to the Tower of Babel account—in fact,

⁵⁹ The *Αἰγυπτιάδα* is a work which purports to tell of the ancient history of Egypt up through the Hellenistic period.

⁶⁰ Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 259–260.

⁶¹ Sterling's focus on cultural polemic is most likely driven by genre classification. As noted above, he has argued that the *Antiquities* ought to be read as apologetic historiography. Because Sterling reads the *Antiquities* as an apologetic, however, he has focused on the possible polemical nature of Josephus' work.

Sterling finds the significance of colonization language in Josephus' version of the Table of Nations (Gen 10), not in the story of Babel itself. But certainly colonization language is about more. Speaking of colonization served functions beyond a simple claim to antiquity. With Josephus' choice to recast the story of Babel using colonial language he invokes—intentionally or not—an entire discourse which would have been familiar to his Greek speaking audience. The discourse of colonization in antiquity was certainly not a stable cultural commodity; there was no one literary model which Josephus would have utilized. I follow Carol Dougherty who has examined the *topos* of colonization within classical antiquity; or, as she claims, the *poetics* of colonization. There is a historical reality:

From the eighth to the sixth centuries BCE, the Greeks established an astounding number of new cities on foreign soil as far east as the Black Sea and as far west as the coast of Spain.⁶²

No less real than the establishing of such colonies is the stereotypical manner in which later Greek authors recalled the age of colonization. The pattern isolated by Dougherty is rather simple:

The Greeks represent colonization as a familiar story—crisis, Delphic consultation, and resolution—and this 'emplotment' of the colonial narrative is one of the ways the Greeks (as a culture) authorize their common past.⁶³

These three elements—crisis, Delphic consultation, and resolution—are building blocks which can be manipulated by various authors in their reconstruction of a useable past.⁶⁴ Josephus' story of Babel fits imperfectly within this model. There are enough connections, however, to suggest that Josephus was attempting to appeal to a common Greco-Roman pattern of colonial narrative. But the differences are equally important: they give us a sense of how Josephus is negotiating the dominant poetics of his readership, while also holding to his own ideological goals. He employs colonial rhetoric while modifying it to accord with Jewish exegetical and theological sensibilities.

We must ask first: in what ways does Josephus' rewriting of Babel accord with this narrative pattern isolated by Dougherty? The strongest parallel

⁶² Carol Dougherty, *The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Archaic Greece* (New York: Oxford, 1993), 4; see also Irad Malkin, *Religion and Colonization in Ancient Greece* (Leiden: Brill, 1987).

⁶³ Dougherty, *Poetics of Colonization*, 6.

⁶⁴ For an application of early colonization language to emerging Christianity, see Walter T. Wilson, "Urban Legends: Acts 10:1–11:18 and the Strategies of Greco-Roman Foundation Narratives," *JBL* 120 (2001): 77–99.

to be noted is the focus on divine intervention. It is the deity—in both the Greek texts and in Josephus—who authorizes the people to send out colonies. Josephus piles up a number of rationales for colonization familiar to a Greek audience.

When God bade them, because of their large population, to send out colonies, in order that they might not engage in civil strife (ἵνα μὴ στρασιάζοιεν) with one another, but cultivating much of the soil they might enjoy its fruits, they did not listen to God. (A.J. 1.110)

Josephus adds reason to reason for the command of the deity. The increase in population concerns the deity because civil strife will be the certain result. In addition, the people are not taking full advantage of the land. (In the biblical context, one hears an echo of the command to be fruitful and fill the earth.) Within the discourse of colonization, however, there is another echo: increased population inevitably leads to civil strife over the limited resources which can be produced. Dougherty demonstrates how these two issues—overpopulation and productive land—are connected in Greek thought. She points out that “Plato, in the *Laws*, mentions colonization as a method of population control for his hypothetical state.”⁶⁵

Besides, in the final extremity, if all means fail us to keep the number of five thousand and forty households constant, if mated love should cause an excessive glut of population, and we find ourselves at a loss, we have ready to our hand the old contrivance we have more than once spoken of—we can send out colonies of such persons as we deem convenient.⁶⁶

According to the pattern of colonization, a Greek readership would expect the overpopulated people to enquire of the deity. This is the exact opposite of the path followed by the Babelites. Within Josephus there can be, of course, no consultation of the Delphic oracle. There is, rather, a functional equivalent in the assertion that the deity counseled the people to send out colonies. Here is a clear example of the influence of Greek thinking on Josephus’ narrative. There is nothing in the biblical text which would suggest that Yahweh was anything but a *reactive* character. It is possible, as has been mentioned, that the Primeval Blessing could have been viewed by Josephus as an example of divine provenience. If such was the case, however, Josephus does not make his thinking explicit. Speaking to a Greek audience, however, the activity of the deity would be perfectly natural. There

⁶⁵ Dougherty, *Poetics of Colonization*, 16.

⁶⁶ *Leg.* 740e. Translated by A.E. Taylor in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*.

is, of course, one major difference. The oracular nature of Apollo was always reactive. The crisis precedes the oracular response and the order to colonize. Colonization itself is a response to civic crisis. In the Josephan version of Babel, the order to colonize comes before the outbreak of any hostility between the people on the plain. In fact, civil strife is finally the very means utilized by the deity to bring about colonization. For the Greek reader, the Babelites are not only disobeying an oracular directive from their god, but they are also simply working against their own best interest. Josephus draws on the theme of increased population as necessitating colonization from the Greek tradition; given this particular background, the people's refusal to colonize goes against common sense. *Why* would a people refuse to colonize if they see that they are quickly multiplying? Failure to colonize will inevitably lead to factional strife occurring as more and more people fight over less and less material goods and land.

Josephus' version of the Tower of Babel, furthermore, can be read as an anti-colonial tale, that is, as a narrative that subverts all the normal expectations an ancient Gentile reader might have with regard to the colonial tale. A wealth of language and themes from colonial discourse, which would have been familiar to a Greek audience, are inverted in the Babel account. There is no consultation of Delphic Apollo, but *uninitiated contact* from the Jewish god concerning colonization. The colonization movement is not lead by an *oikist* (the ancient hero of colonial tales), but resistance to colonization is incited and spear-headed by the *anti-oikist* Nimrod who makes it his business to disrupt the colonial enterprise. The people—faced with population explosion and the concomitant factional strife over food and supplies—do not seek to meliorate the situation through the normal cultural channels, just the opposite. They resolutely band together in one place and resist the deity. From a Greek perspective the Babelites are acting against nature. The inversion of colonial rhetoric is utilized to demonstrate the foolishness of the Babelites and the decency and wisdom of the divine.

Josephus rewrites the Tower of Babel by placing the narrative against the background of Greek and Roman flood traditions, introducing notions of political disintegration and tyranny and overlaying the narrative with standard cultural literary understandings of the relationship between the divine and colonization. Josephus modifies each of these traditions slightly in light of Jewish exegetical traditions and theological commitments. In the end, however, a narrative emerges which would have been quite familiar and explicable to a Greco-Roman audience. In some ways, Josephus' presentation leads to a much more generous interpretation of the Babelites and their disobedience. Both their fear of another Flood and the specter of tyranny

and demagoguery might conceivably lead a native reader in the Roman context to view the Babelites with a small amount of sympathy. They are not simply rebellious and hubristic. Babel is presented as a tragic tale, a timeless cautionary account. In another sense, however, the tower builders are viewed as working out of sync with the common cultural discourse of colonization. They are afraid of dispersion, which, from a Greek perspective makes absolutely no sense. From a contemporary Jewish perspective, however, dispersion may be precisely the point. It is to a reading of Josephus' Babel in light of his Jewish readership that we finally turn.

5. *The Politics of Dispersion: Babel between the Lines of War*

Many studies of Josephus' presentation of biblical material in the *Antiquities* focus simply on additions, subtractions or alterations, often with a focus on tracing exegetical traditions. I have termed this practice *exegetical excavation*. The rhetorical function of Josephus' rewriting of biblical material is equally important, however. While many of the traditions which Josephus makes use of are present in other ancient Jewish expositions of the Babel narrative, the use to which Josephus puts these traditions is uniquely his. In the preceding, we have explored how Josephus colonized the story of Babel in order to make it understandable to a Greco-Roman audience. In the final section of this chapter, we turn our attention to the political undercurrent of Josephus' rewritten tower. If colonization language typified Josephus' message to a Greco-Roman audience, dispersion is the watch-word for his Jewish readership. The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple and the scattering of the Jewish people following the revolt against Rome are ever present in Josephus' rewritten Babel.

Barclay has argued that "Josephus' rhetoric demonstrates more than technique: it reveals his ideological commitments."⁶⁷ Returning again to the issue of intended audience(s) and the original context of the publication of the *Antiquities*, the politics of Josephus take center stage. Part of the justification for reading Josephus politically comes from the very context in which he composed the *Antiquities*. Barclay, utilizing the language of post-colonialism, has made a strong case for reading Josephus through political lenses.

⁶⁷ John M.G. Barclay, "The Empire Writes Back: Josephan Rhetoric in Flavian Rome," in *Flavius Josephus & Flavian Rome* (ed. Jonathan Edmonson, Steve Mason, and James Rives; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 315–316.

In the case of Josephus' rhetoric we may watch an accomplished writer handle the complexities of unequal power-relations, in which an elite foreigner in Rome carefully shapes his discourse in order to win maximal advantage for himself and for his people, within the constraints of his social and political environment. Thus, even when it is not overtly political, Josephus' rhetoric invites us to consider his politics, the strategies by which his cultural tools are made to serve political ends.⁶⁸

I will argue that the "political ends" in the case of the tower narrative are (1) to downplay the sinfulness of the Babelites, (2) to encourage political quietism amongst Jews and (3) counsel patience with the divine dispersion on the part of post-70 CE Judaism. In his study of Josephus' use of Scripture in *The War*, Schwartz has argued a similar point. In an analysis of Josephus' famous speech to the rebels before the walls of Jerusalem in *The War* Schwartz claims that:

Josephus has imposed a quietistic and cultic interpretation on every (biblical) story which did not have one and, sometimes, quite apart from the needs of his argument, has told the stories in forms so altered that some are nearly unrecognizable.⁶⁹

It is likely that Josephus—narrating his history of the Jewish people in the light of the destruction of the second temple and continued unrest in both the Diaspora and the land of Israel—would seek to encourage patience and quietism on the part of many Jews. Following in line with his overall ideological program in *The War*, he would also seek to limit the image of rebellion, as well as mitigate it by connecting it to justifiable fear. *The War*, in the words of Bilde, "forms the basis of a concrete political programme which is an alternative to the policy of the party which supported the war."⁷⁰ The dispersed Jewish people, post-70 CE, should not fall once again to the tyrants who wish to continue rebelling against Rome. Josephus' narrative of Babel is an example of political exegesis. Reading between the lines of Josephus' rewritten Babel, we can see Josephus seeking out a political stance which takes seriously the fear of dispersal given the historical experiences of the Jewish people, but claims that God has willed dispersal and the dissolution of community in the past for the sake of the future of the Jewish people. The great tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem is recast through the narrative of Babel, ultimately, to provide for hope.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Schwartz, *Josephus and Judean Politics*, 28.

⁷⁰ Per Bilde, *Flavius Josephus between Jerusalem and Rome: His Life, his works and their Importance* (JSPSup 2; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 78.

How does Josephus do this? Mason, we should recall, pointed to two separate forms of irony—audience-dependent and text-dependent. I will focus on an example of text-dependent irony in my attempt to understand how a Jewish audience (post-70 CE) might have experienced Josephus' version of Babel. The (inter)texts in question are from *The Jewish War*. Josephus claims that he wrote two versions of this work—one in Greek and the other in Aramaic.⁷¹ One of the main goals of *The War* is to shift the blame for the conflict between the Romans and the Jews to only a certain (small) faction among the Jews—a war party which forces and terrorizes the rest of the population to go along with the revolt against Rome. Per Bilde has argued that *The War* should not be seen as simple Roman apologetic on the part of Josephus for his benefactor, Vespasian. Rather,

Josephus is writing about an indescribable disaster. The fall of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple are in reality incomprehensible and inconceivable events, and [*The War*] must be regarded as an endeavor to understand and describe how things could have come to this end.⁷²

To accomplish this goal, Josephus draws on a biblical predecessor: deuteronomic theology. The people are suffering for their sins against God; they have failed to obey the deity and Rome is now playing the part of Assyria and Babylon before her. There is one major difference between Josephus' conception of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in *The War* and deuteronomism. Josephus focuses much more attention on the actual political—rather than cultic—transgressions of the Jewish war party. The Jewish people *as a whole* are victims. Nowhere is Josephus clearer in his presentation of where blame lies than in the introduction to *The War*:

For, that it owed its ruin to civil strife, and that it was the Jewish tyrants who drew down upon the holy temple the unwilling hands of the Romans and the conflagration is attested by Titus Caesar himself, who sacked the city; throughout the war he commiserated the populace who were at the mercy of the revolutionaries. (J.W. Preface)

There are two terms of importance in this programmatic passage: *civil strife* and *tyranny*. It was civil strife (στάσις) which allowed the Romans under

⁷¹ "So for the benefit of the Emperor's subjects I have decided to translate into Greek the books which I wrote some time ago in my native language for circulation among non-Greek speakers inland" (J.W. Preface). It is, of course, unclear how large an Aramaic readership Josephus' work would have enjoyed. His statement may be read more as propaganda supporting the authenticity and Jewish-perspective of his work for a Greek audience. English translations from *The Jewish War* are taken from G.A. Williamson.

⁷² Per Bilde, *Flavius Josephus*, 72–73.

Pompey to come to power in Judea and civil strife leading up to the Revolt doomed the people and institutions to failure. Inowlocki highlights the presence of *στάσις* terminology with regard to both Babel and Josephus' presentation of the last days of the rebellion. She claims that:

in both texts, it is related to food and famine: in the *A.J.* (1.110), God commands humankind to send out colonies to avoid strife and enjoy the fruits of the earth. In [the *Jewish War*] the state of confusion brings about confusion and political strife.⁷³

In both narratives civil strife serves as the dominant reason for the dispersion of a group of people. Josephus presents Vespasian as an astute general who knows when to stand back from battle.

In the Roman camp all the generals treated the enemy's internal divisions as a godsend, and in their eagerness to march on the City begged Vespasian, as commander-in-chief, to lose no time. Vespasian replied that they were wide of the mark and were hankering after a theatrical display of armed warriors—a dangerous pose—oblivious to safety and commonsense. If he did march on the City at once, he would only reunite the enemy and turn their full strength against himself; if he waited he would find their numbers reduced by their internal divisions. He might safely leave the generalship to God, who was handing over the Jews to the Romans without their lifting a finger, and making them a present of victory. (*J.W.* 4.366)

Additionally, all throughout *The War* Josephus links the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple to the actions of certain impious individuals whom Josephus characterizes as tyrants. Once again, Inowlocki has noted the narrative connections:

the characters of his Babel story are reminiscent of those present in the *War*. Nimrod and his followers may parallel John of Gischala and the various rebellious factions active during the Jewish war.⁷⁴

Her argument is quite persuasive.

In particular, like Nimrod, John of Gischala is said to wish for tyranny (*B.J.* 4. 389, 569), to have a 'terrible desire for tyranny.' Like John, [Nimrod] incited the people to rebellion, he changed the government into a tyranny, trying to bring the mob into a dependence on its own power. In both cases, the

⁷³ Inowlocki, "Josephus' Rewriting of the Babel Narrative," 184. She makes the further suggestion that the translation of *בבל* into *συγχυσις* (confusion) in the Septuagint may have prompted Josephus—consciously or not—to connect the actions of the Babelites with those of the generation of the rebellion against Rome.

⁷⁴ Inowlocki, "Josephus' Rewritten Babel Narrative," 182.

people are seduced by the political strength and determination of the two characters (A.J. 1.113–114 and B.J. 4.391). Is it a coincidence if John, like Nimrod, is presented as a builder?⁷⁵

Bilde, furthermore, claims that Josephus “describes the role of the Jewish people in the *War* as the innocent, defenseless tool of those who were actually guilty, the Jewish ‘tyrants’, ‘bandits’ and rebels.”⁷⁶ The story of Babel, therefore, is a biblical metaphor for a political reality. This is what Inowlocki means by referring to the rewritten Babel as a political myth and what I mean with the language of political exegesis. The narrative of the Tower of Babel, for Josephus, is seen as a primordial and universal example of a contemporary political crisis. The two events may be read in light of one another—the two events may be used to interpret one another. This is consistent with Josephus’ manner of reading biblical narrative. Feldman claims that:

like his beloved model, Thucydides, Josephus believed that history more or less repeated itself, inasmuch as its chief ingredients consisted of people, who have not changed very much through the centuries in the factors that drive them. Hence, he finds many parallels between biblical events and personalities and those of his own day, particularly during the war against the Romans.⁷⁷

Josephus makes a very simple analogy. The tower itself is the temple, *in nuce*.⁷⁸ The terms ‘Tyranny’ and ‘Civil Strife’ might seem slim evidence on which to make the claim that Josephus is arguing politics in his account of Babel. It is useful to examine here a key passage from *The War* and to read

⁷⁵ Ibid., 183.

⁷⁶ Bilde, *Flavius Josephus*, 74.

⁷⁷ Feldman, *Studies in Josephus’ Rewritten Bible*, 555.

⁷⁸ Inowlocki makes a similar connection by drawing on other texts in *The Jewish War*. “Simon bar Giora is said to have settled in one of the towers of Jerusalem, which ‘had received his tyranny’ (B.J. 5.169). Josephus extensively describes the towers of Jerusalem built by Herod; two of them are depicted as being as tall as large (B.J. 5.166; 170), which is also the case with the Tower of Babel (A.J. 1.116). This may indicate that the architecture of Jerusalem at the time of the war reminded Josephus of the Babel story” (Inowlocki, “Josephus’ rewriting of the Babel narrative,” 183–184). I would also note that Josephus highlights the physical remains of towers following the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. At the end of a long siege, the Roman commander Titus orders the absolute destruction of the city walls. Josephus holds that the only structures allowed to remain were “the loftiest of the towers, Phasael, Hippicus and Mariamme, and the portion of the wall enclosing the city on the west: the latter as an encampment for the garrison that was to remain, and the tower to indicate to posterity the nature of the city and of the strong defenses which had yet yielded to Roman prowess” (J.W. 7.1–3). The towers of Jerusalem, according to Josephus, are meant to highlight the great name of Rome!

it alongside the tower narrative if we wish to hear the political resonances of Josephus' rewritten Babel. Following the historiographical conventions of his day, Josephus places a number of speeches on the lips of famous actors in the historical drama of the Jewish Revolt. One such speech is that of Ananus, a high priest. Josephus has the highest regard for Ananus, "a man of soundest judgment who might have saved the City if he had escaped the hands of the plotters" (*J.W.* 4.187). In the speech under discussion, Ananus urges the people of Jerusalem to expel the Zealots who have taken refuge in the temple and set up their own high priests based on the drawing of lots. His speech (which we must assume Josephus endorses) is relevant for the language it uses to present the Zealots.

What unbearable tyranny. But why blame the tyrants? Don't they owe their existence to you and your lack of spirit? They have seized the strongest place in the City—*from now on the Temple must be spoken of as a citadel or fort*; tyranny is strongly entrenched and the enemy can be seen over your head.

The prevalence of tyranny language is to be noted first. The people at large are berated for submitting to the tyranny of the zealots. Submission to tyranny is antithetical to the Jewish tradition according to the high priest.

Have you really lost the most honorable and deep-rooted of our instincts, the longing for freedom? Are we in love with slavery and devoted to our masters, as if our fathers had taught us to be doormats? Why, again and again they fought to the bitter end for independence, defying the might of both Egypt and Persia rather than take orders from anyone. (*J.W.* 4. 247)

Ananus continues by claiming that the people would fare better under Roman rule than under the power of these home-grown tyrants. The people speak of freedom, but Ananus chides them by asking "shall we refuse to yield to the masters of the world and put up with tyrants of our own race" (*J.W.* 4:247)? We saw above that Josephus's characterization of Nimrod as a tyrant was grounded in Greek political thought; tyranny was the lowest and most degraded form of government. Josephus suggests that the people of Jerusalem were capable of revolting against tyrants who were leading them on to destruction—indeed they should have done so from the very beginning.

The right thing to do would have been to nip their attacks in the bud when they were pouring abuse on your own flesh and blood; but by your utter indifference you encouraged these ruffians to plunder. (*J.W.* 4.158)

The Babelites seem to go along with the tyrant Nimrod. Ananus' speech before the Jerusalemites heaps contempt upon these tyrants but also

demonstrates the ease with which they can terrorize and control a population. The people are often tacit accomplices of the tyrant. The account of Babel is an object lesson for what occurs when an entire population goes over to the council of a tyrant; there is no end to the impiety and damage that can occur.

More important is Ananus' assertion that the temple has been transformed by these tyrants into a fortification—a citadel or a fort. It is one of the hallmarks of Josephus' understanding of the Babel narrative that the tower itself was built as a means of protection and safety. In Josephus' account of Babel, the tower is a defensive structure against the (future) aggressive actions of the deity. *The War* also presents the Zealots engaged in a rather similar type of action: attempting to fortify the city of Jerusalem against the Romans. To do so, however, is to go against the will of the deity according to Josephus. It might be objected that (for the analogy to work) if tower is equal to temple, God must equal Rome. This is not ultimately a problem. For Josephus, revolt against Rome was to be equated with revolt against God. In this regard, the historian could claim an impressive theological pedigree. It was a commonplace of much prophetic literature that God would utilize foreign kingdoms to punish the people for their sins (Isa 5:6–7; Jer 5:12–17). We saw above that, if the tower is a defensive structure, under the guidance of Nimrod it also becomes an offensive structure. The people are literally making war against the divine through their building of the tower. The line between protecting one's community and religious institutions and rebellion is easily crossed, Josephus argues. Even the most praiseworthy undertakings can become adulterated and blasphemous.

The writing of *The War* took place after the events which it describes. There is something foregone in Josephus' presentation of the infection of the body politic with civil strife and tyranny. Another Revolt was on the horizon. In between the two Revolts, with Josephus living in Rome, the situation was dire. Continued revolt against Rome, both in Judea and in the Diaspora, was an on-going possibility that was fueled by a number of messianic movements. We know of localized revolts of portions of the Jewish populations. Around 116–117 CE a number of these revolts broke out. Barclay claims that:

the diaspora communities in Egypt, Cyrenaica, Cyprus and Mesopotamia were involved in the most serious disturbances of their history, a chain of revolutions which left hundreds of thousands dead.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ John M.G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 78.

The revolt in Egypt, for example, was led by a messianic figure known as king Loukuas. The most famous post-70 CE revolt took place from 132–135 under the leadership of Simon bar Kokhba. It is interesting to note that *The Fifth Sibylline Oracle*, a product of the Egyptian diasporic community which is dated to the period between the Jewish Revolt and the Bar Kokhba rebellion, contains a tradition of the future establishment of a temple and a tower in the messianic age.⁸⁰ The language associated with this later day temple/tower is reminiscent of Babel.

For a blessed man came from the expanses of heaven, with a scepter in his hands which God gave him. And he gained sway over all things well, and gave back the wealth to all the good, which previous men had taken. And the city which God desired, this he made more brilliant than stars and sun and moon, and he provided ornament and made a holy temple, exceedingly beautiful in its fair shrine, and he fashioned a great and immense tower over many stadia touching even the clouds and visible to also that all faithful and all righteous people could see the glory of the eternal God, a form desired.⁸¹

(5 Sib. Or. 414–415; 420–425)

If some Jews in the diaspora were considering revolt against Rome to be an eschatological option and anticipating the establishment of a temple and a tower as the outcome of such rebellion, the narrative of Babel would have served as a particularly power metaphor. Josephus may have been engaged in not only translating but re-translating the imagery associated with the tower.⁸² This is consistent with his previous goals. Bilde claims that Josephus, in writing *The War*,

is concerned to prevent a repetition of the catastrophe, and therefore he tries to convince his people that they chose the wrong solution. This runs like a red thread through the entire account [of *The War*], but Josephus also makes a direct warning against renewed attempts at rebellion.⁸³

⁸⁰ Collins dates the work in its current form to the period of Hadrian. “The date of the collection as we have it is determined by the favorable reference to Hadrian in 46 ff. This gives us the date of what is probably the latest part of the book. In all, it seems like we have a group of Jewish oracles from the end of the first century AD, but collected under Hadrian” (Collins, *The Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism*, 75).

⁸¹ The translation is from John J. Collins, “Sibylline Oracles: A New Translation and Introduction,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume I: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1983), 317–472.

⁸² Other early Jews clearly held that Babel-language carried eschatological import (Acts of the Apostles 2). To be clear, I am not suggesting that Josephus had first-hand knowledge of a text like *The Fifth Sibylline Oracle*, only that he could have been exposed to similar traditions to those incorporated into the oracle.

⁸³ Bilde, *Flavius Josephus*, 76.

I believe it is also likely that Josephus would have sought opportunities in his retelling of Jewish history in the *Antiquities* to propound a similar political message—especially in light of counter-translations such as the one found in the *Fifth Sibylline Oracle*.

6. Conclusion

I stated above that a political reading of Josephus' Babel seeks to take seriously the fear of the Jewish people given the historical experience of dispersion (past and present), but also counsels patience on the part of the people. This is quietism: faced with the reality before them "the Jews should wait patiently until the situation changes and this will come to pass in God's own time."⁸⁴ Like the Jews of the generation of the destruction, the Babelites have witnessed horrific events in the life of their people. They have been forced to confront the question of divine providence directly. They are a fearful people who are easily tempted to turn aside from trusting in the promises of their God to following the desires of a tyrant who promises them security, wealth and prosperity. Their attempts at fortification have failed and they have been scattered. In the end, if Josephus was trying to convey a political message through his account of Babel, it fell on deaf ears. The Romans crushed a later rebellion under the messianic hopeful Bar Kokhba, outlawed the presence of Jews in Jerusalem and renamed the city Aelia Capitolina.

Josephus' rewritten Babel is far more complex than it may appear on initial inspection. The author demonstrates that he is carefully attuned to both audiences of his ancient history of the Jewish people. For his Greco-Roman readers/hearers, the account of Babel is a narrative which draws on key political myths (the danger of tyranny and the need to colonize). The Babelites are portrayed as a semi-sympathetic group who foolishly chose not to heed the warnings of their benevolent deity. For his Jewish constituency, however, there is a simple and powerful message underlying the rewritten account: fear of the future is understandable given the experiences of the past, yet the divine has spoken and dispersion is the future of the Jewish people. Continued revolt and rebellion will only lead to greater terrors. Revolt against Rome is revolt against God. Babel has repeated itself and Babel may repeat itself again. Josephus' translation, it would appear, was prophetic.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 77.

CHAPTER SIX

TRANSLATED TO HEAVEN: THE TOWER OF BABEL AND *THIRD (GREEK) BARUCH*

Wherever a story comes from, whether it is a familiar myth or private memory, the retelling exemplifies the making of a connection from one pattern to another: *a potential translation* in which narrative becomes parable and the once upon a time comes to stand for some nascent truth.¹

1. *Introduction*

The previous three texts (*Jubilees*, *L.A.B.* and the *Judean Antiquities*), despite significant differences, were alike in at least two ways. First, authors who lived (at least for some time) in the land of Israel composed these works by the deployment of pre-existing exegetical traditions about Babel. Each text, furthermore, rewrote the narrative of Babel as part of a larger retelling of the sacred history of the people Israel. The tower was translated in each instance to address contemporary concerns facing the larger community: a plea to return to the sacred language of Hebrew and a rejection of the wisdom of the *nations*; a focus on renewed trust in the will of God in the face of external oppression and internal debate; and a cautionary tale on the far-side of destruction, a warning to make peace with a scattered and diasporic life. *Third (Greek) Baruch* (henceforth, *3 Baruch*) also rewrites Babel, but transfers the narrative from the terrestrial and particular past of Israel to the celestial, universal, and eternal present. *3 Baruch* also presents us with our first voice from the Jewish Diaspora. Babel appears in *3 Baruch* as a warning against excessive apocalyptic hope and as a hidden symbol that the oppression embodied and symbolized by Babel has been noted by the God of Israel; eternal judgment, furthermore, has been passed on such oppression.

¹ Mary Catherine Bateson, *Peripheral Visions: Learning Along the Way* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1994), 11.

The scribe Baruch, following his lamentation over the destruction of Jerusalem, is translated to the heavenly realm where he witnesses several episodes drawn from the Primeval History (Gen 1–11). While in the heavens he observes the punishment and transformation of both the planners and builders of the tower. His vision is a whispered sign of hope to a Jewish community living in the Egyptian diaspora that the God of Israel has not forgotten his scattered people. Present reality, this work will argue, should be interpreted in light of moral truths so unchanging that they are written into the very substance of the cosmos.

2. *Third (Greek) Baruch and Hermeneutics in Apocalyptic Form*

There is very little consensus concerning the work known as *3 Baruch*.² The text itself was largely lost in antiquity and only recently (relatively speaking) re-discovered—first in Slavonic and then in Greek.³ There is even substantial debate as to whether the work is Jewish or Christian in origin. In its present form it has undeniably been Christianized. The most blatant example is the explicit reference to Christ.

And God sent the angel Sarasaël, and he said to him, “Rise, Noah, plant the sprig, for the Lord says this: ‘Its bitterness will be changed into sweetness, and its curse will become a blessing, and its fruit will become the blood of God, and just as the race of men have been condemned through it, so through Jesus Christ Emmanuel in it they will receive a calling and entrance into paradise’.”⁴
(*3 Bar* 4:15)

The remainder of the text, however, has a rather negative interpretation of Noah’s post-deluge viticultural activities. The Christian material, at any rate, has been integrated in a less than consistent manner. The presence of distinctly Jewish exegetical traditions (as we will see below) also makes it less likely that the text was originally a Christian composition. Collins speaks for the majority when he claims that “the Christian redaction goes

² For the most recent overview of the work, see Alexander Kulik, *3 Baruch: Greek-Slavonic Apocalypse of Baruch* (CEJL; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010).

³ See Daniel C. Harlow, *The Greek Apocalypse of Baruch (3 Baruch) in Hellenistic Judaism and Christianity* (SVTP 12; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 2–10 for a discussion of the two textual traditions.

⁴ In my quotations of *3 Baruch*, I will be following Gaylord’s translation of the Greek text. See H.E. Gaylord, Jr., “3 Baruch: A New Translation and Introduction,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume 1* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1983), 653–679; citations in Greek are from Picard; see J.-C. Picard, *Apocalypsis Baruchi Graece* (ed. A.-M. Denis and M. de Jonge; PVTG 2; Leiden: Brill, 1967).

beyond mere insertions and constitutes a rereading of the book, but the core composition is rightly recognized as Jewish.”⁵

The work is an apocalypse.⁶ Two main forms of apocalyptic literature existed within ancient Judaism

one of which is characterized by visions, with an interest in the development of history, while the other is marked by otherworldly journeys with a strong interest in cosmological speculation.⁷

3 *Baruch* is an example of the later, although narrative elements culled from the Primeval History are utilized. Within the *otherworldly journey* an individual (usually of significant cultural status) is taken on a tour of the heavens and granted a vision of the divine. In the Jewish context, the biblical figure of Enoch is one central character who makes an appearance in a number of otherworldly journeys: such was the interpretation of the enigmatic biblical notice that “Enoch walked with God, and he was not” in Gen 5:24. A number of apocalyptic texts are credited to the figure of Baruch, however, as Baruch provided an ideal candidate for Jewish authors seeking to make sense of the destruction of the second temple. As the scribe of Jeremiah who witnessed and mourned the destruction of the first temple, he was a ready-made image for the survivors of the Jewish revolt against Rome. His laments and questions concerning the destruction of the first temple provided the perfect narrative screen for discussions of the meaning and significance of the destruction of the second temple.⁸

The purposes of the otherworldly journey (or *ascent apocalypse* as it is also called) could be multiple.⁹ Harlow claims that

⁵ John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (2d. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 248. Harlow’s work is quite interesting in this regard. He does not attempt ultimately to solve the problem. Rather, he provides two readings of the work: one Jewish reading and a second, Christian reading.

⁶ For a discussion of the genre, see John J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Semeia 14; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979).

⁷ Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 6.

⁸ For an overview of the literary career of Baruch in later Jewish literature, see J. Edward Wright, *Baruch ben Neriah: From Biblical Scribe to Apocalyptic Seer* (Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).

⁹ For a discussion of the ascent apocalypse within Hellenistic Jewish literature, see Mary Dean-Otting, *Heavenly Journeys: A Study of the Motif in Hellenistic Jewish Literature* (Judentum und Umwelt; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1984); David J. Halperin, “Ascension or Invasion: Implications of the Heavenly Journey in Ancient Judaism,” *Religion* 18 (1988): 47–67; Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); A. Segal, “Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and their Environment,” *ANRW* II.23.2 (1980): 1333–1394.

at the level of religious meaning, the heavenly journey afforded an imaginative way of asserting the order of creation and the truth of biblical history. Its eschatological dimension indulged in a fantastic preview of the afterlife in order to portray the collective fate of the nation or else that of the individual after death.¹⁰

The focus on the order of creation or on the collective fate of the nation or individual in otherworldly journeys often served another function—theodicy. The orderliness of creation and a strong conviction in the morality of that order is a somewhat universal cultural concern. There are times, however, when such issues become more acute. The period following the Roman destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 CE, a time when the very future of the Jewish people would have been in question, led naturally to such a time of intense questioning.

Third Baruch, however, is an atypical example of the ascent apocalypse for a number of reasons. Himmelfarb claims that

ascent apocalypses that date from the first century CE or later contain seven heavens, although the picture of a single heaven continues to appear in a wide variety of texts.¹¹

It can be argued that the cosmography of *3 Baruch* is deficient as *3 Bauch* terminates with the fifth heaven. There is, additionally, no vision of the divine (epiphany)—a standard element of almost all ascent apocalypses. Such (perceived) deficiencies have led some scholars to suggest that the text as we possess it is truncated and that it lacks its original conclusion. There is no textual evidence to support such a contention. Harlow has suggested that the abrupt conclusion of the work, especially the lack of epiphany, is actually a central element of the author's argument. *3 Baruch*, so the argument goes, is an anti-apocalyptic apocalypse.¹² It utilizes an apocalyptic form and the common narrative of the heavenly ascent in order to oppose such literature and the concomitant claims that certain hidden secrets of the natural order or of divine governance can be known by human beings. Unlike other

¹⁰ Harlow, *The Greek Apocalypse*, 1.

¹¹ M. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 32. There is no consensus on the rationale for seven heavens, although Greek, Sumerian and Babylonian backgrounds have all been adduced as possible outside influences on the notion of seven-heavens. The biblical preference for 'completion' as expressed by the number seven would seem a preferable option as well. For a broad overview of apocalyptic cosmologies, see Adel Yarbro Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

¹² For a detailed discussion upholding the integrity of the five-storied heaven and lack of epiphany in *3 Baruch*, see Harlow, *The Greek Apocalypse*, 34–76.

examples of the ascent apocalypse, *3 Baruch* does not focus on revelation of the natural order (e.g., *Similitudes of Enoch*) or conclude with a vision of the divine (e.g., *Ascension of Isaiah*). Himmelfarb asserts that “*3 Baruch* is engaged in polemic against the understanding of the ascent of the visionary in apocalypses like the *Ascension of Isaiah*.”¹³ Baruch’s journey, in contrast, terminates in the fifth heaven with an image of the angels bringing baskets containing the deeds of the righteous, the wicked and those in-between before the divine for judgment (*3 Bar.* 12–15). The moral order of the universe (and God’s righteous judgment) is thereby asserted but not demonstrated through seeing.

Collins’ bifurcation of Jewish apocalyptic literature into ‘historical’ and ‘cosmological’ can also be questioned in light of the evidence of *3 Baruch*. The interplay between biblical history and the visionary ascent is a notable feature of this work, wherein a rewritten account of the Primeval History serves as the narrative thread of Baruch’s ascent; the rewriting and interpretation of events from the beginning of Genesis serves as the vehicle for Baruch’s revelation. This is a somewhat unique approach within apocalyptic literature as nothing new is being revealed to Baruch in this recapitulation of the primeval history of humanity—*except for its proper interpretation*. The approach also allows for the close connection between the end-time (*endzeit*) and the pre-time (*urzeit*) as the revelation of what is to come is only a proper understanding of what has been. In this retelling, “narrative becomes parable” and “once upon a time becomes some nascent truth.”

A proper understanding of this nascent truth is based on the observation that the entire vision of Baruch is a response to his lamentation over the destruction of Jerusalem. One might expect that his vision, therefore, should serve as a theodicy—the revelation should eventuate in a justification of God with regard to the destruction of Jerusalem. This is at least consistent with the manner in which other apocalyptic texts from roughly the same time period function (e.g., *4 Ezra*, *2 Bar.*). The prologue itself offers evidence that Baruch is not likely to receive a direct answer to his entreaty. The initial greeting by the angel who appears to Baruch downplays the importance of lamenting over Jerusalem. “Know, O man, greatly beloved man, and do not concern yourself so much over the salvation of Jerusalem” (περὶ τῆς σωτηρίας Ἰερουσαλήμ) (*3 Bar.* 1:3). The angel further informs Baruch that he should “cease irritating God, and I will disclose to you other mysteries greater than

¹³ Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 90.

these" (3 Bar. 1:6).¹⁴ It is precisely the connection, or the lack thereof, between the narrative frame (Baruch's lament) and the subsequent visions from the Primeval History which has so troubled scholars. Harlow notes that "the prologue focuses on the destruction of Jerusalem, but this matter never receives explicit treatment in the visions which follow."¹⁵ The key term here is *explicit*. This supposed discontinuity between prologue and visionary journey has led some scholars to claim the 3 Baruch is flatly dismissive of Jerusalem and that it seeks to relativize its religious importance as a marker of Jewish identity. Collins suggests that:

3 Baruch resolves the problem of the destruction of Jerusalem by virtually breaking its connection with Jerusalem. This step was in some respects the logical culmination of the tendency ... in Hellenistic Judaism to view Judaism as a religion of ethical monotheism and downplay its ethnic and particularistic aspects.¹⁶

Collins is following closely here the work of other scholars (i.e., Picard and Nickelsburg)¹⁷ who build what can be termed a Jerusalem-rejectionist argument on the basis of three passages in 3 Baruch. The presentation of Babel, however, raises some questions concerning such a rejectionist reading of 3 Baruch.

¹⁴ Quotations from 3 Baruch typically follow Gaylord's translation of the Greek text. In this particular instance, however, the Slavonic preserves a rather different message. The angel charges Baruch not with the cessation of lamentation over Jerusalem, but with accurately transmitting the mysteries about to be revealed to him. "Only tell me that you will neither add nor omit (anything), and I will show you mysteries which no man has seen" (Slavonic 1:6). There are a number of reasons why I believe it is possible that the Slavonic may preserve the original text here. First, the promise to neither "add nor omit" resonates with the language of Deuteronomy (e.g., 4:2 and 13:1). The authority of the text of 3 Baruch is thereby strengthened by this biblical echo. Secondly, the Greek version and its consistent focus on downplaying the importance of Jerusalem can be easily explained as a by-product of its Christian redaction wherein the theological importance of the temple is dismissed in light of the revelation of Jesus Christ.

¹⁵ Harlow, *Greek Apocalypse of Baruch*, 29.

¹⁶ John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (2d. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 259.

¹⁷ Nickelsburg holds that the difference with real distinction between 3 Baruch and other contemporary apocalypses is that the author seems unconcerned with "hope for a nation reconstituted around Land and Temple" and focuses instead on "an individual, heavenly eschatology" (George W.E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981], 303). For some unstated reason, Nickelsburg does not address 3 Baruch in the 2003 revised edition of his work. References below are to Nickelsburg, 1981.

3. *Why Babel?*

The author of *3Baruch* devotes two entire heavens to the discussion of the Tower of Babel. Below is the exchange between Baruch and his angelic guide at length.

2:3 And he showed me a plain within the heaven. And there were men dwelling on it with faces of cattle and horns of deer and feet of goats and loins of sheep. 2:4 And I, Baruch, asked the angel, "Tell me, I pray you, what is the thickness of this heaven in which we have journeyed, and what is its width and what is this plain, that I may report it to the sons of men." 2:5 And the angel, whose name was Phamael, said to me, "This door which you see is (the door) of heaven, and (its thickness) is as great as the distance from earth to heaven, and the width of the plain which you saw is the same (distance) again." 2:6 And again the angel of hosts said to me, "Come, and I will show you greater mysteries." 2:7 And I said, "I pray you, show me what those men are." And he said to me, "These are the ones who built the tower of the war against God, and the Lord removed them."

3:1 And taking me, the angel of the Lord led me to a second heaven. And he showed me there a door similar to the first. And he said, "Let us enter through it." 3:2 And we entered, flying about the distance of 60 days' journey. 3:3 And he showed me there also a plain, and it was full of men, and their appearance was like (that) of dogs, and their feet (like those of) deer. 3:4 And I asked the angel, "I pray you, lord, tell me who these are." 3:5 And he said to me, "These are the ones who plotted to build the tower. These whom you see forced many men and women to make bricks. Among them one woman was making bricks in the time of her delivery; they did not permit her to be released, but while making bricks, she gave birth. And she carried her child in her cloak and continued making bricks. 3:6 And appearing to them, the Lord changed their languages; by that time they had built the tower 463 cubits (high). 3:7 And taking an augur, they attempted to pierce the heaven, saying, 'Let us see whether the heaven is (made) of clay or copper or iron.' Seeing these things, God did not permit them (to continue), but struck them with blindness and with confusion of tongues, and he made them be as you see." (*3Bar.* 2–3)

These two chapters raise a number of interpretive issues. Among these are the significance of the distinction between the builders and the planners, the presence of the pregnant woman making bricks, the double purpose of the tower as both war against God and as an instrument of heavenly speculation, and the blind and bizarrely animalistic Babelites.¹⁸ On a more

¹⁸ Kulik has suggested, unconvincingly in my opinion, that "these texts look like two slightly edited variants of the same account ... the duplication of the vision of the Builders must be the result of compilation. Two versions of the same description could have been placed successively, according to the model well known in biblical criticism and attested in

basic level, however, there is a fundamental question which must first be addressed: how are we to explain the very *inclusion* of the Tower of Babel within this particular ascent apocalypse? What was significant about either the biblical narrative itself *or* the exegetical traditions associated with it which made Babel a useful image to deploy in this context? This is ultimately a question concerning the receptor language which was responsible for the production of *3 Baruch*. By receptor language I refer to the Hellenized, mostly likely Alexandrian, context in which the text was produced. I will argue below that the interpretive traditions included by *3 Baruch* had a great deal to do with the Alexandrian milieu in which the work was produced. The question of Babel's inclusion is even more puzzling given that other, comparable, ascent apocalypses do not discuss the Tower of Babel, but almost uniformly comment upon another myth in the Primeval History: the fall of the Watchers (Gen 6:1–4).¹⁹

The fragmentary narrative of the 'sons of God' and their desire for human women was quite popular during the Second Temple period. It provided a number of Jewish thinkers with a way to explain the origin of evil as deriving from outside the human realm. Evil originated, according to this mythology, because of a group of 'angels' who lusted after and procreated with human women, thereby blurring the line between the human and divine realms and producing giants for their offspring. These giants introduced great misfortune into the human realm; evil, according to this model, was inflicted upon humanity from above. The Watchers, as they are called, in crossing the line between the human and divine realms, were responsible for the introduction of forbidden knowledge (such as astronomy, metallurgy, etc.) to humanity. The earliest of Jewish apocalypses, the Book of the Watchers (now contained in *1 En.* 1–36), develops this particular myth.²⁰ The narrative of Babel and the Watcher myth both focus on the vertical intersection of the divine and human realms. The head of the tower, after all, is said to be in the heavens. Harlow views the inclusion of Babel by *3 Baruch*—and the exclusion of the Watchers myth—as a counter-argument to those whose etiology of evil is heavenly rather than terrestrial.

other pseudepigrapha" (Kulik, *3 Baruch*, 139). I will suggest below, however, that the division of the builders and planners into two different groups is likely significant.

¹⁹ See Chapter Two above for the possible exegetical connection between the tower builders and the myth of the Watchers.

²⁰ For a thorough discussion of the myth of the Watchers and its *nachleben* in ancient Judaism and early Christianity, see Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of the Enochic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

The message that emerges is quite the obverse of that conveyed by the myth of the Watchers ... this myth depicts the origin of evil in the world as an invasion of the earthly realm by divine beings. The archetypal sin according to 3 Baruch is the invasion of the divine realm by human beings. Thus the author of 3 Baruch not only omits the story of the Watchers from his account of primeval history but also, in effect, stands the myth on its head.²¹

Such a focus on the responsibility of human beings for the evil present in the world is consistent with the larger theological system presented in 3 Baruch; a system in which the individual's moral responsibility before the deity is consistently stressed. Our author draws on pre-existing exegetical traditions which viewed the Babelites' ambitions as sinful because of their desire to reach the heavens and deployed these traditions to critique the etiology of evil put forward by those who adhered to the Watchers myth. We witness here a clash of exegetical traditions in the construction of ancient Jewish theology. I also believe, however, that the narrative of Babel was chosen by the author of 3 Baruch because it provided a number of other interpretive opportunities. It is to those *other* possibilities that we now turn.

Third Baruch makes a distinction between those who plan to build the tower (συμβούλην δόντες τοῦ ποιῆσαι) and those who actually engage in the building process itself (οἰκοδομήσαντες).²² Both groups are culpable and both are punished. Nickelsburg asserts that "this distinction derives ultimately from the two introductions to the biblical story in Genesis 11:3 and 11:4, treated here in reverse order."²³ It is certainly possible that, given ancient Jewish exegetical tendencies to atomize the language of Scripture, an early interpreter would have conceived of 11:3 and 11:4 as referring to two separate groups. If that is what Nickelsburg is suggesting, however, he does not make his reasoning explicit. As we have seen above, the separation of the 'whole earth' into two groups is not without precedent in Jewish interpretive literature. Pseudo-Philo narrates a conflict between the vast majority of the descendants of Noah who wish to engage in the building project and the dozen who resist.²⁴ The distinction of some significance there, however, is

²¹ Harlow, *The Greek Apocalypse*, 59. Harlow's 'substitution' argument is ultimately an argument from silence.

²² A later Jewish tradition will actually divide the Babelites into three separate groups, see *b. Sanh.* 109a.

²³ Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 299.

²⁴ Harlow misrepresents the situation slightly. He claims that "the specification of two different groups is found in more elaborate form in the two separate accounts in the Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo-Philo" (Harlow, *The Greek Apocalypse*, 110). While it is true that the form is more *elaborate*, the two separate groups mentioned in Pseudo-Philo are the majority who go along with the building plan and the minority (the extreme minority!) who refuse.

not between builders and planners, but between those who are an oppressive power and those who are being oppressed. The analogy to Pseudo-Philo makes more sense in this regard. The inclusion of the figure of the pregnant woman making bricks, witnessed by Baruch in the second heaven, dramatizes the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy.²⁵ It is possible that the location of the builders in the first heaven—furthest from the presence of the divine—is meant to comment upon their relative wickedness compared to those who *plan* to build the tower. It is difficult to determine, however, what real distinction the author of *3 Baruch* is trying to make between these two groups and whether such a distinction has any relevance in the historical and social context of the author. Furthermore, “devoting two of the five heavens to the punishment of these figures certainly exceeds all requirements of narrative context,” notes Harlow.²⁶ The excessive focus on Babel, therefore, requires some explanation. The actions of the Babelites are important for the author for reasons that go beyond narrative necessity. The sustained focus on Babel and its construction speaks to the importance of the image itself for the author.

4. *The Animalistic Babelites*

One of the most puzzling aspects of the rewritten Babel of *3 Baruch* is the transformation of the builders and planners into human-animal hybrids. Kulik suggests that:

The identification of the two groups of chimeric creatures that exclusively occupy the lower heavens as the builders of the Tower satisfies “Baruch” and thus probably the originally intended audience of the work. However, for a reader from another epoch it is difficult to see the connection between such remote images.²⁷

While the tradition is certainly puzzling to the modern reader, it is not entirely unique in ancient Jewish exegesis. It has both a literary precedent and an afterlife. The very identity of the people, following the destruction of the tower, was altered by God according to Pseudo-Philo. Following their attempt to throw Abram into the fiery furnace in *L.A.B.* 6, the

²⁵ Later rabbinic texts contained the same tradition about a pregnant brick-maker, but with regard to the narrative of the oppression in Egypt; see *Pirqe R. El.* 48 and *Tg. Ps.-J. Exod* 24:10.

²⁶ Harlow, *The Greek Apocalypse*, 112.

²⁷ Kulik, *3 Baruch*, 140.

people of the land did not turn from their evil thoughts and they came together again to their leaders and said, 'Let not the people be ever defeated. And now let us come together and build ourselves a city and a tower that will never be taken away'. (L.A.B. 7:1)

The juxtaposition of these two chapters from *L.A.B.* 6 and 7 redounds negatively on the Babelites. The building program is now undertaken with the full-knowledge of divine disapproval and "the evil plans of the builders become still more evil because they attempt to follow them through despite God's actions at the furnace."²⁸ Pseudo-Philo describes the punishment of the Babelites for their aspiration to civilization in terms of a forced return to the harsh realities of nature. The God of Pseudo-Philo passes an even harsher judgment than his biblical counter-part.

Therefore, behold, I will divide up their languages and scatter them into all regions so that one man will not recognize the other nor will people understand each other's language. I will assign them to the cliffs, and they will build for themselves abodes in nests of stalks and will dig caves for themselves and live there like beasts of the field. And so they will be before me all the time. (L.A.B. 7:3)

Pseudo-Philo continues his description of divine justice with the claim that God "divided up their languages and changed their appearances (*mutavit eorum effigies*)" (L.A.B. 7:5). Jacobson suggests that, at its origin, this tradition of the diversification of human features is a natural outgrowth of ancient meditations on the physiognomic diversity of the human species. He argues that:

LAB is alluding here, together with the division of languages, to the division of mankind into varied physical features according to races and nationalities. The ancients were perfectly aware of and interested in physical appearance between geographically distinct people.²⁹

In fact, language and ethnic identity could even be equated. The author of *3 Baruch*, however, imagines the transformation in a more disturbing fashion.³⁰

²⁸ Frederick J. Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 48.

²⁹ Howard Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum: With Latin Text and English Translation* (AGJU 31; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 384.

³⁰ I cannot argue that the author of *3 Baruch* possessed knowledge of Pseudo-Philo's *L.A.B.* as a written work. Kugel's notion that exegetical motifs travel probably best explains the inclusion in *3 Baruch* of transformed Babelites. See James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 255–256. The

Within his tour of the first two heavens, Baruch witnesses strange creatures. The people are described by Baruch in somewhat bizarre and graphic detail.

And there were men dwelling on it [the plain] with the face of cattle (τὰ πρόσωπα βοῶν) and horns of deer (τὰ δὲ κέρατα ἐλάφων) and feet of goats (οἱ δὲ πόδες αἰγῶν) and loins of sheep (αἱ δὲ ὀσφύες ἀρνῶν). (3 Bar. 2:3)

Or,

And he showed me there also a plain, and it was full of men, and their appearance was like (that) of dogs (ἡ δὲ θεωρία αὐτῶν ὁμοία κυνῶν), and their feet like that of deer (οἱ δὲ πόδες ἐλάφων). (3 Bar. 3:3)

How are we to explain such imagery? Dean-Otting has suggested that the transformation of the Babelites into animals is representative of a deeper Jewish conviction about the nature of human beings as dichotomous creatures—composed of both angelic and animalistic materials.

There is ... a belief similar to that expressed in III Baruch ... in pre-rabbinic Judaism. Gen 1:26 ff. is the basis for the anthropology of the mosaic law: 'let us make man in our image, after our likeness' denotes the humanity of man Man was created both as angel and as animal. Angelic qualities include knowledge, standing upright, speaking Hebrew; animal qualities encompassed eating and drinking and so forth (b. San 38b; b. Shab 151b). Until the people of Israel sinned they were like angels; thereafter they became like animals. Perhaps this idea led the author of III Baruch to create the 'strange beasts' who are the sinners dwelling in the first and second heavens.³¹

Such an interpretation is challenged by the presentation of the righteous as birds constantly singing praises to God in the fourth heaven. The distinction does not seem to be between angelic and animalistic but between various sorts of animals. The presentation of the righteous as birds is not, I would think, commentary on their (depraved) humanity. I would present two alternate interpretations to explain the animalistic Babelites.

The author of 3 Baruch deployed the narrative of Babel as an isomorphic representation of both Egyptian bondage and Babylonian captivity. The interpretive elements present within the translation of the tower narrative in 3 Baruch can, therefore, be explained by reference to these grand narratives of the Israelite religious tradition. The tower narrative is viewed

form this exegetical motif takes, however, is the result of the canonical company in which the author of 3 Baruch places the Babelites. It is also a reflection of the historical and cultural context of the author himself.

³¹ Dean-Otting, *Heavenly Journeys*, 134–135.

as a condensation and re-application of these larger narratives. We have already seen above the multiple connections possible between the narrative of Babel and narratives dealing with Egyptian servitude (the focus on bricks in both accounts) and Babylonian captivity (the location of Babylon as the primeval site for the tower). These relationships can be used, I believe, to explain the transformation of the Babelites into animals. I would point first to a purely exegetical rationale.

Daniel 4 narrates the transformation of the arrogant Nebuchadnezzar into an animal form. Troubled by a dream of a tall tree which was hewn down by a holy Watcher, Nebuchadnezzar summons Daniel to interpret his dream. There follows an account of Daniel's interpretation of the dream and its actualization in the life of the Babylonian king. The dream is a warning to the king that the Israelite deity will punish him for excessive pride. Nebuchadnezzar, despite a warning from Daniel that his kingdom will be taken away from him, fails to appreciate the serious nature of his dream, and a mere twelve months later, offends the Israelite deity while surveying his kingdom: "There is great Babylon, which I have built by my vast power to be a royal residence for the glory of my majesty" (Dan 4:27). For this rather innocuous (if self-congratulatory) statement, Nebuchadnezzar is punished. For our purposes, it is the nature of the punishment which is *most* significant: "you are being driven away from men, and your habitation is to be with the beasts of the field (וְעַם חַיִּוֹת בְּרָא)" (Dan 4:29). Here is a term similar to the one which appears in Pseudo-Philo's second retelling of Babel. The mighty king of Babylon remains transformed into an animal for seven years, until he repents of his arrogance and returns to his right mind.³² Here, I suggest, is one possible source for the claim in *3 Baruch* (already present in Pseudo-Philo) that the Babelites—the exegetical ancestors of Nebuchadnezzar—were changed into animals. Furthermore, Nebuchadnezzar's sin was only verbal—he permitted himself to boast to himself of his own accomplishments. The Babelites, however, make a monument to their grandiosity.³³ The punishment is correspondingly more severe—eternal transformation into animal/human hybrids. The suggestion that the author of *3 Baruch* is

³² For a discussion of the tradition of Nebuchadnezzar's transformation into a beast of the field in later Jewish and Christian tradition, see Matthias Henze, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: The Ancient Near Eastern Origins and Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4* (JSJSup 61; Leiden: Brill, 1999); see also, Christopher Hays, "Chirps from the Dust: The Affliction of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:30 in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context," *JBL* 126 (2007): 303–325.

³³ We will see below, however, that the sin of the Babelites is also presented as primarily verbal in nature in later rabbinic interpretation (see chapter eight).

drawing on the image of Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 4 in his inclusion of zoomorphic creatures in his account of Babel does not discount other possibilities; it does, however, offer a proximate and exegetical answer for the presence of these creatures in Babel traditions.³⁴

There is an additional possibility which might add depth and cultural context to the presence of the animals-builders of Babel in *3 Baruch*. It is generally agreed that *3 Baruch* was produced in Alexandria. I would suggest that the exegetical association of the Babelites with the Egyptian bondage of the Israelites might also be responsible for the production of animal-human hybrids at Babel. The figures would be a parody of the mighty Egyptian builders and their animal deities. A number of Jewish authors—particularly those living and writing in Alexandria—make special mention of the animal deities of their Egyptian neighbors.³⁵ The author of *The Wisdom of Solomon* is especially noteworthy in this regard. VanderKam suggests that the author of the work “distinguishes three kinds of idolatry.”

The first is the kind practiced by nature worshipers (Stoics may be meant); for them he has some respect because they sincerely search for God through his creation. The second kind is the form practiced by those who manufacture idols; like the prophets Isaiah (44:9–20) and Jeremiah (10:1–6), he mocks them. The last and worst are the Egyptian animal worshipers who not only revere animals but chose the most loathsome kinds.³⁶

The worship of any idol—but particularly the worship of animalistic images—is presented as the apogee of irrational behavior. It was “foolish and wicked thoughts, which led them astray to worship irrational serpents and worthless animals” (*Wis* 11:15). The worship of such creatures is, moreover, considered infantile: “For they went astray on the paths of errors, accepting as gods those animals that even their enemies despised; they were deceived like foolish infants” (*Wis* 12:24). The invective against animal worship by this Alexandrian author demonstrates a special animus on the part of some Jews against the peculiar form of traditional Egyptian religion. The transformation of the Babelites into animal creatures, however, even if a parody and polemic, still requires some justification.

³⁴ Later rabbinic tradition expands the transformation of the builders of the tower to include their transformation into “apes, spirits, devils and night-demons” (*b. Sand* 109a).

³⁵ The philosopher/exegete, Philo of Alexandria, is also highly critical of the animal-deities of his Egyptians neighbors. A good discussion of his aversion to this aspect of Egyptian religion is found in Sarah J.K. Pearce, *The Land of the Body: Studies in Philo's Representation of Egypt* (WUNT 208; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 241–308.

³⁶ J.C. VanderKam, *An Introduction to Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 127.

Wisdom of Solomon contains a principle of punishment which might elucidate the matter. The choice of plagues of animals against the Egyptians is not a random one by the deity. The god of the Israelites purposely chose to

send upon them a multitude of irrational creatures to punish them, so that they might learn that one is punished by the very things by which one sins.

(*Wis* 11:15)

The Babelite's own transformation, therefore, may be far from arbitrary.³⁷ The tower builders sought to cross the dividing line between the human and divine realms; they thought, perhaps, they could mix with the divine. They are punished with a strikingly different form of hybridity: part human, part animal. In an Alexandrian context, furthermore, the transformation of the builders into animal forms may be meant to communicate a perceived relationship between the Babelites and the Egyptians. While the initial impetus to imagine theriomorphic tower builders may have been an exegetical association between Dan 4 and Gen 11, or even the migration of an exegetical tradition, the particular form the association takes is shaped by the cultural context of Alexandria. Exegesis and polemic are intertwined.

5. War against God and Cultural Context

Two separate motivations are given for the Babel affair in *3 Baruch*. Ascending to the first heaven (which is described as a plain/πεδῖον), we noted that Baruch observes a group of human-animal hybrids.³⁸ In response to Baruch's inquiry into the identity of the creatures, Baruch's angelic guide informs him

³⁷ In addition, Kulik also points to passages from other Second Temple Jewish texts which see the transformation of the evil into hybridized forms as divine punishment. The author of *Second Baruch* says that "the shape of those who now act wickedly will be made more evil than it is now" (*2 Bar.* 51:2). Kulik also traces such beliefs to Greek philosophy. "Similar ideas were developed by Plato, assuming reincarnation of men to beasts: 'if he does not still refrain from wickedness he will be changed every time, according to the nature of his wickedness, into some bestial form after the similitude of his own nature' (*Tim.* 42b-c)" (Kulik, *3 Baruch*, 141). At the same time, the transformation into animals of the builders and planners may communicate on multiple level. Kulik notes that "in contrast to the list of zoomorphic features of the second group ... the description here [of the builders] corresponds to the beginning of the list of clean animals of Deut 14:4-5" (Kulik, *3 Baruch*, 132). Why the builders of the tower would be associated with kosher/pure animals and the planners of the building project would be associated with semi-demonic animals imagery is an interesting question.

³⁸ The narrative of Babel, with its reference to a plain, informs the entire cosmological system of the author of *3 Baruch*. His work, alone of all the ascent apocalypses, describes the heavens by means of this term.

that “these are the ones who built the tower of war against God (οἱ τὸν πύργον τῆς οἰκοδομήσαντες) and he removed them” (3 Bar. 2:7). The motif of the tower builders as waging a war against the divine is certainly not a unique feature for 3 Baruch. The terminology with which it is articulated, however, is quite significant. The generic claim that the Tower of Babel was a structure intended to wage war against the deity (one of Kugel’s “exegtical motifs”) is not identical with the description of the tower by the term θεομαχία. The term would have been an evocative one to a Hellenized audience and, in slightly different fashion, to a Greek speaking Jewish audience.

The concept of the θεομαχός has deep roots in Greek culture.³⁹ The term—although not the concept—appears for the first time in Euripides’ work, *Bacchae*. It refers there to the King of Thebes, Pentheus, and his adamant refusal to accept the divinity and cult of the god Dionysius in his realm. For his impiety, he is driven mad, transformed into a Bacchant and eventually disarticulated and decapitated by his own mother. Dionysius, it would seem, is a jealous god. There is a clear association between engaging in this type of war against god, madness and transmogrification into an animalistic form. The resonance which is more *a propos*, however, is the depiction of the primordial battle against Zeus and his fellow Olympians by the Titans. The key text in this regard would be Hesiod’s *Theogony* (421 ff.). As was noted above, another text produced in the Egyptian Jewish diaspora, *The Third Sibylline Oracle*, places the account of the Tower of Babel (3 Sib. Or. 97–109) as a preamble to a euhemeristic account of the great primordial battle of Greek mythology.⁴⁰ John Weaver, however, in his study of the term θεομαχός in Acts of the Apostles 5, cautions against an over-reliance on such literary parallels in attempts to discover the significance of the term in various narrative contexts.

The realization that the θεομαχός was a widely known figure of ancient Greek mythology is crucial to elucidating its presence in mythological and non-mythological literature from the ancient world ... Aside from the explicit use of the term in myths relating to exploits of Dionysius, the figure of the θεομαχός is variously represented in other myths portraying both gods’ and humans’ bellicosity toward the deity.⁴¹

³⁹ The classic discussion of the concept is J.C. Kamerbeek, “On the Concept of the ΘΕΟ-ΜΑΧΟΣ in Relation with Greek Tragedy,” *Mnemosyne* 1 (1948): 271–283. Thanks to Dr. John Weaver, via personal communication, for much of the following discussion.

⁴⁰ John J. Collins, *The Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism* (SBLDS 13; Missoula, Mont.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1974).

⁴¹ John B. Weaver, *Plots of Epiphany: Prison-Escape in Acts of the Apostles* (BZNW 131; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 136.

The association of the Babelites' tower with this common cultural term should give us pause. What resonances would be evoked, intentionally or not, by the use of this particular term? Is the use of the term meant to convey a more universal approach on the part of the author of *3 Baruch*, an attempt to integrate biblical narrative into the larger mythological framework of the Hellenistic world? A highly literate non-Jewish, Hellenistic audience would perceive immediately the *narrative form* into which this translated Babel would fit. Here is a simple story of the terrible things that happen when people oppose the will of their deity. The biblical echo to Daniel and the icon of oppression and temple destruction, Nebuchadnezzar, would have remained audible to a Jewish audience versed in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible. This translation of the tower (like the one carried out by Josephus) would have referenced two cultures, perhaps masking the more subversive Danielic reading of Babel by the inclusion of the term θεομαχός.

The second motivation given for the building of the tower in *3 Baruch* 3 is a desire to determine the nature of the heavenly realm. "Let us see whether the heaven is (made) of clay or copper or iron." Human interest in the nature and function of the heavens had a long pedigree in the ancient world. The course of the sun and the other stars and their scientific and religious significance was the subject of any number of works in Jewish and pagan antiquity. The author of The Astronomical Book, contained in an abbreviated form in Ethiopic translation in *1 En.* 72–82, revels in the minutiae of mysteries of the created order.⁴² Vanderkam holds that:

the A[stronomical] B[ook] presents itself as a revelation to Enoch by the angel Uriel ... He does not simply tell Enoch the contents of the book, but rather takes him on an immense tour, showing him the workings of the sun, moon, stars, the heavenly gates through which they pass, and some of the major geographical features of the earth.⁴³

A deep understanding of the heavens and their inhabitants implied specialized knowledge. In addition, the Astronomical Book had a tremendous influence on works such as *Jubilees* which served as catalysts for various forms of sectarianism in Second Temple Judaism. *Third Baruch* looks very similar to a work like the Astronomical Book on first glance. Both texts narrate an angelic guided tour of the heavenly regions and focuses on astronomical details. (*Third Baruch* 6–10 deals extensively with issues related

⁴² Aramaic fragments from Qumran (4Q208–211) suggest that the original work was much more detailed than the surviving Ethiopic translations. See Vanderkam, *Early Judaism*, 89.

⁴³ Ibid.

to the course of the sun and moon.) The author of *3 Baruch* suggests early in his ascent apocalypse that such knowledge, however, is restricted to those whom God chooses to enlighten. Furthermore, ultimate and absolute knowledge of the mysteries of God cannot be known. Idle speculation is roundly condemned through the figure of the Babelites whose ascent into heaven is not the result of an angelic guide.

By situating traditional material related to the tower of Babel in the context of a heavenly ascent, the author of *3 Baruch* implies that human beings should not try to transcend their natural limitations—their creaturely finitude—by attempting to see God but should stay on earth where they belong. Ironically enough, the author chooses the literary form of an ascent to heaven in order to make just this point.⁴⁴

The Tower of Babel of *3 Baruch*, therefore, may ultimately be an anti-apocalyptic symbol which portrays an excessive desire to understand the inner-workings of the universe as mirroring the hubris and blasphemy of the primordial tower builders. “The fate of the tower figures anticipates Baruch’s own failure to see God.”⁴⁵ Via the tower narrative, *3 Baruch* presents a heavily revised and reflective viewpoint on the limitations of human knowledge which is meant to temper the desire to explore secrets (natural and *moral*) which are the province of God alone.

6. *Babel as a Symbol of Hope?*

A proper understanding of the rewritten Babel of *3 Baruch* is inseparable from the larger question of the work’s attitude towards Jerusalem and hope for its future restoration. As already noted, most scholars take a fairly dim view of hope for a future restoration of Jerusalem and its temple in connection with *3 Baruch*. Harlow presents the consensus view:

The visions in the first and second heavens continue the reorientation of Baruch’s concern that was initiated in the prologue. They constitute part of a sustained movement away from the historical particularity of Jerusalem’s fall in favor of a meta-historical vision of humanity’s sin.⁴⁶

A new vision of Judaism is thereby articulated, one in which the central symbols of Land and temple are no longer dominant. But the image of Babel presents a potential contrast to this supposedly dismissive attitude. Babel

⁴⁴ Harlow, *The Greek Apocalypse*, 59.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

points to the oppressive Roman powers responsible for the destruction of the second temple and the dispersion of the people from the land. If those elements (land and temple) are downplayed in the theological economy of *3 Baruch* ("do not concern yourself so much over the fate of Jerusalem"), however, we should expect to see such a refocusing reflected in the narrative of Babel. Yet, the message conveyed by this rewritten Babel is that "the arrogant victors will be punished."⁴⁷ There is, perhaps, more hope for Jerusalem present than is often assumed.

Most scholars fail to see any hope for restoration in *3 Baruch*. An extended focus on the oppression of Rome (in the guise of Babel), however, is conceivably meant as a source of solace and comfort for Jews struggling to rationalize the destruction of the temple. It is a means of surviving sacrilege, to use a phrase recently suggested by Steven Weitzman.⁴⁸ It is not necessary to have a fully articulated image of the ultimate triumph of God and the restoration of the temple in order to see hope for the future present in a text. Pervious scholarship has failed to reckon with potential signs of positive hope for restoration within the rewritten Babel of *3 Baruch*. Harlow is correct that the "irreducibly mythic identity (of the builders and planners) forbids forcing them to correspond to historical figures of the author's milieu."⁴⁹ At the same moment, it is hard to imagine that the earliest audience of *3 Baruch* would not make some connections between these figures and contemporary events. Collins is correct, but misses the point, when he notes that:

the 'builders of the tower' and their advisors are not punished for destroying Jerusalem but for cruelty (in refusing to release a woman for childbirth) and for attempting to discover the nature of heaven.⁵⁰

Such acts—paradigmatic oppression and an over-zealous drive to know the secrets of the heavens—are symptoms of a much larger disorder. They point canonically towards hegemonic power which seeks always to oppress and destroy the people of God. The aggressive divine response to their activities, inscribed in this translation in the very structure of reality, demonstrates that the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE is fundamentally similar to the previous destruction of the first temple in 586 BCE (as the choice of Baruch himself suggests) and even has affinities with the original and foundational

⁴⁷ Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 303.

⁴⁸ Steven Weitzman, *Surviving Sacrilege: Cultural Persistence in Jewish Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁴⁹ Harlow, *The Greek Apocalypse*, 115.

⁵⁰ Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 258.

oppression of Israel in Egypt. The angelic counsel to “not concern yourself so much over the salvation of Jerusalem” is an attempt, not to reduce the trauma of the destruction of Jerusalem, but to place it clearly within a larger narrative of God’s dealings with the people of Israel.

What are the indications that Babel is meant to be a sign of hope and reassurance for diaspora Jews? Nickelsburg has pointed to the description of the tower builders as engaged in *θεομαχός* and their astral curiosity as intertextually important within Second Temple literature. In the first case, he highlights *2Macc* 7:19 wherein Antiochus Epiphanes is chastised by one of seven brothers who refuse to violate the Torah’s dietary prohibitions. The sixth brother warns Antiochus: “Do not think that you will go unpunished for having tried to fight against God.” The term *θεομαχός* is here used. In addition, in relating the last, painful moments of Antiochus’ life, *2Macc* 9:10 states that the tyrant “thought that he could touch the stars of heaven.” War against God and ascending to the stars is here applied to the paradigmatic (Hellenistic) enemy of the people of Israel, a villain best known for his assault on the Jewish temple and his attempted suppression of the Jewish cult. The application of the same term to the builders of Babel in *3Baruch* evokes such images. Contra Collins, the builders are not just chastised for generic cruelty and war against God. Within the genre of apocalyptic literature, this sort of coded meaning may be especially relevant. Given that *θεομαχός* was a widely known term in Hellenistic culture, its more particular application in Jewish literature pertaining to the suppression of the temple cult and the persecution of Jewish worship would have been invisible to a non-Jewish readership.⁵¹ The hidden message, however, would be clear: Such enemies of God are always punished for their arrogance and the people of Israel—once they have confessed their own sins—are always vindicated. To return to *2Maccabees*, the last and youngest brother ably demonstrates this model:

For we are suffering because of our own sins. And if our living Lord is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, he will again be reconciled to his servants. (*2Macc* 9:32–33)

All of this is lost, however, if the notion of war against God is flattened out and drained of its linguistic and cultural specificity.

⁵¹ It is interesting to notice, however, that the initial use of the term *θεομαχός* in Greek literature also deals with a king who is engaged in the suppression of the cult of a deity. The analogy between Pentheus/Antiochus and Dionysius/Yahweh is not a difficult one to make.

7. Conclusion

The vision of the pregnant woman engaged in brick making merits some final attention. Most scholars are content to note that this is a peripatetic tradition which occurs elsewhere in connection with the Egyptian bondage of Israel. Given that Jerusalem is typically portrayed as feminine in the Hebrew Bible and in much Second Temple literature and that Israel is often conceived of as her children (i.e., daughter of Zion), the inclusion of the woman in labor in *3 Baruch* is significant. A comparable apocalyptic text from the same period as *3 Baruch* holds the following image of Jerusalem: "For Zion, the mother of us all, is in deep grief and great humiliation" (*4 Ezra* 10:7). If the woman who gives birth while making bricks is viewed as another image or symbol for Jerusalem, there is some potential hope for the future contained in this rewritten version of Babel. The nations which long ago engaged in such oppressive behavior at Babel are the same nations which today engage in the oppression of mother Zion. A comparable fate awaits them. The author of *3 Baruch* is attempting to make "a connection from one pattern to another" in his translation. His nascent truth is simple: the god of Israel will always respond to such heinous forms of oppression and blasphemy. In the interim, the audience of *3 Baruch* is counseled to focus on "greater mysteries" and turn their attention to acts of virtue, the rejection of vice, and to await patiently the restoration of Jerusalem. God has punished Israel in the past; God has vindicated Israel in the past; God will act again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE INNER TOWER: PHILO AND THE TRANSLATION OF CULTURES

It is undeniable that Philo ‘translated’ the ‘truths’ of Judaism as he understood them—Judaism both as a way of life and a way of thought—into the language of Greek philosophy.¹

Rather than simply giving Scripture ‘other’ meanings, Philo reads Scripture as Moses’ rewritten version of the host culture’s meaning.²

1. *Introduction*

Translation is perhaps not the first word which comes to mind when one thinks of the works of Philo of Alexandria. Indeed, in the literal sense of the term, most scholars would argue that Philo himself was consigned to the realm of translation in his encounter with the Hebrew Bible. One scholar has commented recently that “the evidence suggests fairly definitively that Philo either knew very little Hebrew or none at all.”³ In reading Philo’s version of Gen 11, we are actually reading his ‘translation’ of a translation.⁴ For Philo,

¹ Naomi Cohen, *Philo Judaeus: His Universe of Discourse* (BEATAJ 24; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995), 13–14.

² David Dawson, *Allegorical Reading and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 126.

³ Sarah J.K. Pearce, *The Land of the Body: Studies in Philo’s Representation of Egypt* (WUNT 208; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 27.

⁴ The question of Philo’s knowledge of Hebrew, or lack thereof, has been a topic for debate. In his analysis of Philo’s quotation of Scripture in *On the Giants*, Gooding addresses the issue thusly: “Next the question arises whether in all his citation and exposition of the Old Testament Philo shows any awareness of the Hebrew underlying the Greek translation which he so uniformly quotes, or any evidence of having had access to the meaning of the Hebrew independently of the Greek translation. On both counts, the answer must be no” (David Gooding, *Two Treatises of Philo of Alexandria: a commentary on De gigantibus and Quod*

however, and for many Jews in the Hellenistic period, the Septuagint was far from a simple translation. Philo suggests that the term translator hardly applies to the elders responsible for the rendering of the Hebrew text of Scripture into Greek. Philo opines that anyone (himself *excluded* from this group) who is able to read both Hebrew (Chaldean) and Greek and has read both versions

regard them with awe and reverence as sisters, or rather one and the same, both in matter and in words, and speak of the authors not as translators but as prophets and priests of the mysteries (οὐκ ἑρμηνέας ἐκεῖνος ἀλλ' ἱεροφάντας καὶ προφῆτας προσαγορεύοντες).⁵ (Moses 2:40)

The Septuagint, in other words, is no mere translation—it is not actually a translation at all. On both the linguistic and philosophical level, those responsible for the Greek Bible accomplished the impossible—they made a perfect translation.⁶ The appearance of the Torah in Greek was actually part of the divine plan all along according to Philo. Nothing was lost and much was gained in the passage from Hebrew to Greek.⁷ While we, at a distance, are able to see the ideological program being supported with such statements, I do not wish to claim that Philo makes them in anything other than complete sincerity.⁸ Philo's translation of the tower, therefore, is actually a translation twice removed from the Hebrew text we have been considering.

Deus sit Immutabilis [BJS 25; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983], 199). Of signal importance is Philo's usage of Hebrew etymologies for Scriptural names and places. We will return to the etymological issue below. For a full discussion of all the available evidence for and against Philo's knowledge of Hebrew, see V. Nikiprowetzky, *Le Commentaire de L'Ecriture chez Philon d'Alexandrie: Son Caractere et Portee. Observations philologiques* (ALGHJ 11; Leiden: Brill, 1977), 50–96; S. Sandmel, "Philo's Knowledge of Hebrew," *SPhilo* 5 (1978–1979): 107–112.

⁵ All quotations—Greek and English—of Philo are taken from Colson's translation in the Loeb Classical Library unless otherwise noted.

⁶ *Moses* 2:35–40 for the complete narration of the translation of the Torah.

⁷ See Benjamin G. Wright III, "Translation as Scripture: The Septuagint in *Aristeas* and Philo," in *Septuagint Research: Issues and Challenges in the Study of the Greek Jewish Scriptures* (ed. Wolfgang Kraus and R. Glenn Wooden; SBLSCS 53; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 47–61.

⁸ "Granted that Philo may have allowed himself some exaggeration here for the sake of propaganda, one must conclude that the man who could write these words had no conception of the material differences that exist in many places between the Hebrew original and the LXX translation" (Gooding, *Two Treatises of Philo of Alexandria*, 119). I would modify Gooding slightly and suggest that, at the very least, Philo could assume his intended audience had no real conception of the differences.

2. Philo as Biblical Interpreter

Philo of Alexandria has always presented a challenge for those seeking to classify the literature of Judaism in antiquity. His work has often been treated as *sui generis*.⁹ Scholars have classified Philo as philosopher, mystic and biblical interpreter.¹⁰ The hermeneutical language of Philo, however, is far from an idiolect. Philo stands within a tradition of allegorical reading of cultural classics that reached its apogee in the city of Alexandria several decades before he turned his attention to the writings of Moses.¹¹ We know from passages preserved in early Christian writings that Philo's blend of scriptural exegesis and Hellenistic philosophy were not unique in antiquity.¹² Philo stood within a long and proud Alexandrian-Jewish tradition of reading the Torah through allegorical lenses. F. Siegert claims that "Philo is not an innovator; his works are the rich harvest from two centuries of exegetical work."¹³ Much of that tradition, however, vanished in antiquity; we are left with Philo.

It is an oversimplification, but a useful one, to divide the history of Philonic scholarship into two camps. Stated most succinctly: Is Philo first and foremost a philosopher who made use of the Hebrew Bible or should we view Philo as a deeply religious Jew who struggled to demonstrate the inherent superiority of Mosaic 'philosophy' to Hellenistic thought? These two possibilities define the outer ends of a much more complex interaction

⁹ See Gregory E. Sterling, "Recherche or Representative? What is the relationship between Philo's Treatises and Greek-Speaking Judaism?" *SPhilo* 11 (1999): 1–30. Sterling discusses the knowledge of Philo in the works of other authors in Greek-speaking Judaism.

¹⁰ Each designation (philosopher, mystic and biblical exegete) is tied closely to a particular scholar of Philo. So, for example, E.R. Goodenough believed Philo represented a mystical variety of Judaism, on par with Hellenistic mystery cults. His classic presentation of this theory is *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven: Yale, 1935). Goodenough's mystical interpretation of Philo's writings has generally been rejected. For an overview of approaches to Philo, see Peder Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete for His Time* (NovTSup 86; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1–13. A more generalist introduction is found in Kenneth Schenck, *A Brief Guide to Philo of Alexandria* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). Finally, see Adam Kamesar, "Biblical Interpretation in Philo," in *The Cambridge Companion to Philo* (ed. Adam Kamesar; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 65–91.

¹¹ For a recent discussion of Philo's location within larger Hellenistic interpretive practice, not only Jewish interpretive practice, see Maren R. Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 75–187.

¹² Eusebius' *Preparatio Evangelia* contains ample evidence for this interpretive tradition.

¹³ F. Siegert, "Early Jewish Interpretation in a Hellenistic Style," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation I/1: Antiquity* (ed. Magne Saebø; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 163.

between the philosophical and Scriptural elements in Philo's thought. Recent scholarship has tended towards the latter option.¹⁴ This tendency has led to a much greater appreciation of the role of Philo as biblical exegete. However much Philo makes use of the philosophical systems of his day, much of his writings retain the form of biblical commentary—the actual language of the text is always paramount in Philo's thought.¹⁵ E. Birnbaum, in her study of Philo's notion of Judaism, advocates an approach to Philo which takes his role as biblical interpreter seriously.

In viewing him primarily as a Scriptural interpreter rather than a philosopher ... I am assuming he uses philosophical notions to explicate the Bible rather than using the Bible as a springboard to present some kind of unified philosophy.¹⁶

The use of the term springboard implies that Philo was not ultimately concerned with the text of the Torah itself, only with the possibilities it provided for philosophical exposition. The dichotomy between exegete and philosopher, however, is a false one. The social context—the dominant culture in which he lived and wrote—shaped Philo to be an apologist of Scriptures. David Runia states:

... for the Jews of Alexandria, surrounded on all sides by the proud achievements of the dominant (and prestigious) Hellenistic culture, the preservation of their ethnic and cultural identity was not something that could be taken for granted.¹⁷

Philosophy was the primary intellectual commodity of that Hellenistic culture; Judaism, to be relevant, had to have a place at the table. It is understandable, therefore, that a philosophical system—and a need to demon-

¹⁴ A good representative of the 'Philo as exegete' approach in the work of Ellen Birnbaum, *The Place of Judaism in Philo's Thought: Israel, Jews, and Proselytes* (BJS 290; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996). For an excellent overview of Philo and Scripture see Yehoshua Amir, "Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in the Writings of Philo," in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. Martin Jan Mulder; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1988), 421–453.

¹⁵ Peder Borgen separates the works of Philo into a number of categories. The main division he makes is between 'Rewritten Bible' and 'Exegetical Commentaries.' Within the first category he locates 'The Exposition of the Laws of Moses,' the somewhat generically unique two-volume 'Life of Moses' and the fragmentary 'Hypothetica.' In the second division, he places 'The Allegorical Commentary on Genesis' and the 'Questions and Answers on Genesis and Exodus.' See Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria*, 46–47 for details. The treatment of the tower narrative by Philo is within the 'Allegorical Commentary on Genesis.'

¹⁶ E. Birnbaum, *Place of Judaism in Philo's Thought*, 16.

¹⁷ David Runia, "How to Read Philo," in *Exegesis and Philosophy: Studies in Philo of Alexandria* (Variorum: Aldershot, 1990), 189.

strate the rationality of the Mosaic Torah—drove much of Philo's exegetical work. Philo is best conceived of as trying to maintain stasis between his Scriptural heritage and the dominant philosophical systems of his day. In the process, he was a "conqueror on the verge of being conquered," in the words of Peder Borgen.

In order to appreciate Philo as a biblical interpreter, one must first understand that the high regard in which Philo holds the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek is not a simple curiosity; it is fundamental for a correct understanding of Philo's exegetical approach to Scripture. Philo's allegorical reading of the Hebrew Bible is predicated on his understanding of language in general and of the language of the Septuagint in particular.¹⁸ In order to understand the foundation of Philo's exegetical enterprise, some brief background into Greek and Roman notions of language is necessary.¹⁹ A longstanding debate in antiquity centered on whether names were imposed (θέσει) or if they arose naturally (φύσει). Milka Rubin, in a discussion about debates over the original language in ancient Judaism, Christianity and Islam, presents the matter concisely:

Is human language natural or inherent, or is it merely an assemblage of conventional signs? Thus, while Cratylus, after whom Plato's dialogue is named, believed that a superhuman power was the inventor of names, his opponent Hermogenes believed that they are but signs expressing conventional agreement; Socrates, choosing the middle path, suggested that language is a medium which attempts to reproduce the fixed nature of things, but that this imitation is never perfect.²⁰

Later Aristotelian thought, by contrast, has a purely conventional understanding of language (*De Interpretatione* 16a19). In his study on Philo's theory of language, David Winston holds that Philo argued strenuously against the later Epicurean view that held languages arose by convention amongst the various groups of peoples.²¹ Philo, arguing that names are imposed, has recourse to the narrative of Adam naming the animals in Gen 2:19. In *Questions in Genesis*, he asks:

¹⁸ Grabbe is too forceful when he states that "Greek speculation on the origin and appropriateness of language—which he apparently was aware of—place no productive part in his use of etymology" (L. Grabbe, *Etymology in Early Jewish Interpretation: The Hebrew Names in Philo* [BJS 115; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988], 19).

¹⁹ Deborah Levine Gera, *Ancient Greek Ideas on Speech, Language, and Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 112–181.

²⁰ Milka Rubin, "The Language of Creation or the Primordial Language: A Case of Cultural Polemics in Antiquity," *JJS* 49 (1998): 307.

²¹ David Winston, "Aspects of Philo's Linguistic Theory," *SPhilo* 3 (1991): 109–125.

Why does God bring all the animals to the man that he may give names to them? Scripture has cleared up a great perplexity of those who are lovers of wisdom by showing that names exist by being given and not by nature.

(QG 1.20)

At the same time Adam, according to Philo, grants names to the animals that are in *absolute accordance* with their nature. “Each (name) is an apt and naturally suitable name through the skillful calculation of a wise man who is preeminent in knowledge” (QG 1.20).²² Names, therefore, are imposed but may reflect something of the (humanly recognized?) essence of that which is named.

But Philo is speaking here of the original language of prelapsarian humanity. What is the relationship of that perfect language which expressed the absolute essence of things and the language of the Septuagint, which was Holy Scripture for Philo? We have already seen above that Philo equates the Greek text of the Torah with the Hebrew original.²³ While this may appear a curious assertion, it is *a priori* for Philo and his interpretive work. The Torah of Moses—in both its Hebrew and Greek manifestations—is written in an Adamic language.²⁴ Moses is, in effect, a second Adam. Philo states in one treatise that “Moses, being abundantly equipped with the knowledge that has to do with things, is in the habit of using names that are perfectly apt and expressive” (*Agr.* 1–2). Winston holds:

Philo singles out the Mosaic name-giving for its supreme accuracy. True to his general aim of establishing Moses as the paradigmatic sage par excellence, whose accomplishments in every area outstrip those of all the other sages, he seizes the opportunity to stress Moses’ linguistic acumen that distinguishes his writing from that of all others and requires all would-be exegetes to puzzle over every word or expression in it that gives the slightest impression of imprecision or inadequacy of any kind in order to penetrate the hidden meaning intended by the author.²⁵

²² The double use of ‘nature’ may lead to some confusion. The view which Philo is opposing held that names arose spontaneously (naturally) in different human groupings. Philo, in contrast, holds that names were originally imposed by Adam who saw to the very essence of the things he was naming. Adamic names are, therefore, ‘natural’ but not naturally arising.

²³ Philo would probably admit that Hebrew was the original language of creation; such an admission, however, does not detract from the authority of the Greek Bible.

²⁴ On the concept of Adamic languages in Greek antiquity, see Gera, *Ancient Greek Ideas*, 21–28; for a broad overview of the concept itself, see Umberto Eco, *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy* (trans. William Weaver; San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 23–51; for a more detailed discussion, see Eco, *Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

²⁵ D. Winston, “Aspects of Philo’s Linguistic Theory,” 116.

Philo's absolute conviction in the perfection of Scriptural language is the foundation for his allegorical reading of the Hebrew Bible. Philo's basic approach to Scriptural language is also summarized by Lester Grabbe:

Philo regards the writings of Moses as unique. Names correspond to the characters of those named even though this is not necessarily true with other writings or in real life. Names can be inappropriately given, but not by Moses. It is the responsibility of the exegete to look for this deeper significance.²⁶

This focus on the aptness of language is important for Philo because he believes that Moses is not simply a law-giver or the writer of the early history of the Jews, he is first and foremost a philosopher. Understanding his philosophy requires careful attention to the precise language which the law-giver utilized. The language of Torah participates, in other words, in the reality to which it points—easing, perhaps, the transition between literal and allegorical approaches to Scripture. The Philonic perception of the perfection of the language of the Septuagint serves as a radically new receptor language for his reading of the narrative of Babel.

2.1. *Allegory as 'Radical Translation'*

Philo's exegetical thought is marked by an almost consistent allegorical approach to the reading of the Hebrew Bible. Allegory is derived from two Greek terms: ἄλλως and ἄγρεύω. Its simple meaning is 'to speak otherwise.' The definition is drawn for an allegorist of the Homeric epics, Heraclitus (1st or early 2nd century CE). He states that:

the word itself, which is formed in a way expressive of truth, reveals its own significance. For the trope which says (ἀγορεύων) one thing but signifies something other (ἄλλα) than what it says receives the name 'allegory' precisely from this.²⁷

This etymology suggests that a text may very often say something other than what it appears to say. Bruns has discussed allegory as a form of *radical* translation. According to Bruns, the goal of allegorical reading is to

²⁶ L. Grabbe, *Etymology in Early Jewish Interpretation*, 20. At the same time, Philo's use of etymology in the allegorical interpretation of a cultural classic is connected to larger interpretive practices in ancient Alexandria. A classic study in this regard is the University of Chicago doctoral dissertation of W.D. Woodhead, *Etymologies in Greek Literature from Homer to Philo Judaeus* (Toronto: University Press, 1928).

²⁷ *Homeric Problems* 5.1–2. Heraclitus, *Homeric Problems* (trans. David Konstan and D.A. Russell; WGRW 14; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 9.

“integrate a text (and its meaning) into a radically new cultural environment.”²⁸ According to Bruns:

allegory is, crudely, the squaring of an alien conceptual scheme with one's own on the charitable assumption that there is a sense (which it is the task of interpretation to determine) in which they are coherent with one another.²⁹

The need for allegory had already been experienced by the Alexandrian contemporaries of Philo who had become quite adept at finding culturally acceptable meanings within the classics of Homer, Hesiod and others.³⁰ These literary classics, although the product of a very different culture from the prevailing Hellenistic one in Alexandria, were found to speak other, deeper, truths than one might be lead to believe from a simple, literal reading. A persistent tension, however, runs throughout Philo's own exegetical work. This tension is between the value and legitimacy of the literal meaning of the Hebrew Bible and the importance of its (deeper) allegorical meaning. To some degree, such tension is emblematic of allegorical interpretation in general. The literal is always, in some sense, a foundation for the allegorical. Dawson points to this necessity of the literal for the allegorical:

Allegory always appears with the literal sense, which it may accompany, revise, or displace. If allegory looses tension with the literal sense altogether, it simply becomes a literal sense itself.³¹

Allegory, as developed by Hellenistic thinkers and grammarians, was an attempt to salvage the classics of Greek literature; it was an apology for Homer against his cultured despisers. Pagan allegory was marked, therefore, by an anxiety about the unseemliness of works (e.g., *The Iliad*) considered to be cultural classics. Dawson rejects such a motivation for Philo. He claims that, while

it might be tempting to attribute Philo's allegorical readings to a desire to avoid unfitting or embarrassing passages ... the defensive reaction against the lack of propriety commonly expressed by Hellenistic critics of the poets is largely absent from Philo's interpretive texts.³²

²⁸ Gerald Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 83.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

³⁰ Plato banned the reading of Homer from his ideal Republic because of the unworthy presentation of the deities. “We know from Plato's writings that efforts to save Homer's fame through skillful interpretation were already going on in his day” (Siegert, “Early Jewish Interpretation,” 132).

³¹ Dawson, *Allegorical Reading*, 7.

³² *Ibid.*, 8.

As we will see, the defensive reaction may be largely absent, but it is not entirely so.

There are two constants required for allegorical reading: (1) a text which is considered a cultural classic and is therefore culturally non-negotiable and (2) a larger world-view which is radically different and in significant tension with the cultural classic. Allegorical reading enables these two non-negotiable realities to co-exist. Allegorical reading, in other words, allows for a form of cultural translation. So, for example, *The Iliad* of Homer, with its narratives of capricious deities and their constant intervention in the lives of individuals and nations was problematic for a later Greek culture which valued reason and a notion of the gods as principles rather than personalities.³³ Heraclitus' *Homeric Problems*, which argues for an allegorical understanding of the Homeric Epics, opens with a strong affirmation of the necessity of allegorical reading.

It is a weighty and damaging charge that heaven brings against Homer for his disrespect for the divine. If he meant nothing allegorically, he was impious through and through, and sacrilegious fables, loaded with blasphemous folly, run riot through both epics.³⁴

It was impossible (or, at least, unlikely) for these later-day readers of Homer simply to abandon the text as a primitive relic of an earlier, less enlightened, age.³⁵ The text of Homer, and the culture to which it testified, had to be translated into the language and values of the philosophically inclined Hellenistic elite. It can be argued that the tension between canonical text and dominant world-view was even more pronounced with regard to a text like the Septuagint. The Torah of Moses was not only a cultural classic to Alexandrian Jews, but also divine writ and the very constitution of their community.³⁶

³³ A non-allegorical reading of such classics was perceived as a damnable offense. "It was told that Pythagoras on his descent to Hades saw the souls of Hesiod and Homer being tormented for what they had said about the gods" (Siegert, "Early Jewish Interpretation," 131).

³⁴ Heraclitus, *Homeric Problems*, 1.

³⁵ In the case of Homer, this cultural classic had institutional support. Siegert points out that "Homer's epics had become the basis of Greek culture. Since classical times they were everybody's schoolbook (to be more or less retained by memory) and companion for life. Grammar school began with memorizing lines from Homer and learning grammar from him. High school ... consisted largely of interpretation of Homer and of finding in him examples bearing on every domain of learning" (Siegert, "Early Jewish Interpretation," 131). Given this centrality of the Homeric epics in Greek society, it is almost inconceivable that they could simply vanish. It was only with the coming of Christianity that the Epics began to lose some of their cultural power; even then, however, Homer was only eclipsed, not erased.

³⁶ Another level of difficulty was attached to the Torah. The Jewish community in

Philo's relationship to the literal meaning of the biblical text is a complicated question in its own right. There are places where Philo seems almost antagonistic with regard to the literal meaning of the text. With regard to the claim that God descended to 'see' the Tower of Babel, Philo inveighs:

But you must not suppose that it is this obvious and hackneyed fact which is recorded for us in our most holy oracles, but the hidden truth which can be traced under the surface meaning of the words. (Conf. 143)

In other places, Philo maintains a healthy respect for the literal meaning of the text—this is especially the case with regard to the need to observe the commandments of the Torah in a literal fashion. Thomas Tobin has suggested that Philo's allegorical predecessors in Alexandria typically had a rather dim appreciation of the literal meaning of cultural classics. Reading a text allegorically meant, as a matter of course, that the literal meaning receded. Texts did not possess levels of interpretation. Tobin claims that "Philo is the earliest example that we have of a writer who tries to maintain the validity of both the allegorical and non-allegorical levels of interpretation."³⁷ Philo's appreciation for the literal level is tied closely to his understanding of Judaism as a community living by the philosophy of Moses. That community is sustained and actualized through the fulfillment of the commandments in their literal sense. In one passage from *On the Migration of Abraham*, Philo asserts that, even with an understanding of the deep meaning of the commandments, one is still obligated to fulfill the commandments in their outward, literal sense.

There are some who, regarding the laws in their literal sense as symbols of matters belonging to the intellect, are over-punctilious about the latter, while treating the former with easy-going neglect. Such men I for my part should blame for handling the matter in too easy and offhand a manner. They ought to have given careful attention to both aims, to a more full and exact investigation of what is not seen and in what is seen to be stewards without reproach Why, we shall be ignoring the sanctity of the Temple and a thousand other things, if we are going to pay heed to nothing except what is shown us by the inner meaning of things. (Migr. 89)

Tobin points out that:

Alexandria revered a text that, unlike the works of Homer, was not universally admired and studied and could, therefore, be more easily maligned as 'primitive.'

³⁷ T. Tobin, *The Creation of Man: Philo and the History of Interpretation* (CBQMS 14; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1983), 155.

Philo does not disagree with the allegorical interpretations of the law but rather with the claim that the allegorical interpretation allows one to ignore the literal interpretation of the law.³⁸

The literal meaning remains a foundation upon which every other type of meaning is dependant; tear away or ignore the foundation and the entire theological structure of the Torah collapses.

In addition, allegorical readings do not interact with the literal text of cultural classics in only one way. Dawson cautions against a belief that allegorical readings are hermeneutically innocent readings. Allegorical readings:

Can either protect culture by domesticating deviant texts or criticize culture by giving cultural classics deviant meanings. If the literal sense is culturally shocking (which often is the case when a radical change in cultural ideas coincides with continued veneration of cultural classics), an allegorical reading might well serve to domesticate the text—to show that its literal meaning really is in step with cultural expectations.³⁹

Philo's allegorical reading attempts to demonstrate the inherent superiority of Mosaic philosophy. Is this domestication of sacred text or subversion of dominant culture? It might seem that Philo is domesticating the biblical texts to larger philosophical notions. I believe that it would be a mistake, however, to see Philo's allegorical reading as an example of domestication. It is true that the underlying conviction of Mosaic superiority animates all of his interpretive work. It is clear to outside observers of Philonic thought that Hellenistic philosophy is determining what is intellectually acceptable or normative, thereby setting the intellectual agenda. But Philo's own presentation does not seem to grant that such is the case. He understands his interpretive enterprise rather differently. The purpose of Philo's own Scriptural interpretation is often to subvert the very Hellenistic philosophical system from which he draws interpretive inspiration.⁴⁰ In his exegetical work, Philo is both translating the Hebrew Bible into terms and concepts familiar to the larger Greco-Roman world and, simultaneously, translating

³⁸ Ibid., 156.

³⁹ Dawson, *Allegorical Readers*, 10.

⁴⁰ Philo's situation is not entirely analogous with Homeric allegorical reading. Philo is offering a potentially subversive reading of a text which is *not* considered a cultural classic to those against whom he is arguing. For any subversive message to gain a hearing, he must first convince an audience of the superior status of the Torah of Moses. Philo may thus appear to be reading Moses according to the standards of philosophy (i.e., domesticating the text), but his larger purposes is always to demonstrate the superiority of Moses (subverting the culture).

Greco-Roman philosophical concepts by their encounter with and refraction through the language of Torah. Like all good translators, Philo is caught between his concern to preserve the intent and meaning of the base text against the inevitable ravages of its encounter with the receptor language (in this case philosophical thought) and his conviction that the text in its original language must be defended. O'Leary presents Philo's relationship to Hellenistic philosophy in a concise fashion:

He was too Hellenistic to be absorbed by later Jewish tradition, yet the aim of his writing is to subordinate the Hellenistic values to the Mosaic Law, by showing how the Law precontains and surpasses those values.⁴¹

Functionally, Philo is no different than any other translator of biblical narratives who is influenced in numerous ways by the culture in which they dwell.

3. *The Tower of Philo*

Philo devotes an entire treatise, *On the Confusion of Tongues*, to Gen 11:1–9.⁴² Philo's translation of the Tower of Babel is far more radical at first blush than that of Josephus; at the same time, Philo's reading is much more exegetically based. Philo adheres much more closely to the precise language of Scripture in his interpretation of the tower narrative than does Josephus, or any of the other interpreters encountered to this point. As we will see below, Philo does not strenuously question the literal truth (by which I assume he means the historical truth) of the Tower of Babel. For Philo, however, it is the deeper meaning which is of ultimate importance. The narrative of Babel is not about the construction of a massive tower on the plains of Shinar in the ancient past. It is, rather, an allegory of the human soul. Philo is concerned to demonstrate how the tower narrative does not ultimately concern language differentiation or a unified human attempt at challenging the divine realm, but is, rather, the narrative of those internal dispositions that "tower aloft to menace the soul" (*Conf.* 91). While Philo translates the narrative of Babel into a complex allegory of the soul which draws

⁴¹ Joseph S. O'Leary, "Logos and Koinônia in Philo's *De Confusione Linguarum*," in *Origeniana Octava: Origen and the Alexandrian Tradition/Origene e la Tradizione Alessandrina. Papers of the 8th International Origen Congress. Pisa, 27–31 August 2001* (ed. L. Perron; BETL 164; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 257.

⁴² There is, in addition, a brief discussion of the Tower of Babel in *On Dreams* 2:283–286 and passing references in *The Posterity and Exile of Cain*, 53 and 81.

upon a great deal of Middle Platonic thinking about the nature of the soul and its various parts, he retains a strong connection to the actual wording of Scripture. "Philo's hermeneutic is founded on an absolutist principle," claims Barclay, "the text is, and must be shown to be, rational and worthy in its every detail."⁴³

Scholars are not in exact agreement concerning the philosophical background of Philo. His writings seem to include Platonic, Stoic and Pythagorean elements. His philosophical perspective is often described as "eclectic," a less-than-admiring term that suggests lack of systematic thought to some interpreters.⁴⁴ In what follows below, I highlight Philo's role as Scriptural interpreter. Philosophy, of whatever tradition, is utilized by Philo as the handmaiden of exegesis. His goal is not to present a unified philosophical perspective, but to demonstrate how the best of Greek philosophy has been anticipated (and more beautifully articulated) by the philosophy of Moses. To the extent that one can speak of a unified philosophy of Philo it is the philosophy of Moses. Philo even conceives of himself as being a member of the "school of Moses" (οἱ κατὰ Μωυσῆν φιλοσοφούντες).⁴⁵ Dawson is instructive in this regard. He states that:

Close attention to the way Philo relates literal and allegorical readings show that his principal goal is to protect the integrity of the literal textuality of scripture and to enable that textuality to embrace the Hellenistic meanings of his cultural milieu, especially cultural values concerning the soul and its moral and philosophical education.⁴⁶

Philonic allegory often relies on the translation of biblical characters such as Abraham, Isaac or Jacob into abstract philosophical principles which are universally applicable.

⁴³ J.M.G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 169.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of Philo's philosophical forebears: Gregory E. Sterling, "Platonizing Moses: Philo and Middle Platonism," *SPhilo* 5 (1993): 96–111; David T. Runia, "Was Philo a Middle Platonist? A difficult question revisited," *SPhilo* 5 (1993): 112–140; Jaap Mansfeld, "Philosophy in the Service of Scripture: Philo's exegetical strategies," in *The Question of 'Eclecticism': Studies in Later Greek Philosophy* (London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 70–102. Pearce's observations are concise: "His language and style are most closely modeled on Plato's writings, and the Platonic tradition is a fundamental influence on many of Philo's most central ideas. Philo also engages very extensively with Stoic teaching. Stoic ethics, in particular, play a key role in Philo's interpretation of the passions which he associates symbolically with Egypt in the Pentateuch" (Pearce, *The Land of the Body*, 18).

⁴⁵ *Names*, 223.

⁴⁶ Dawson, *Allegorical Reading*, 102.

Along with the suspension of narrative time and space, the reading of scriptural characters as personifications of psychological dispositions and faculties provides scripture with an underlying meaning of immediate, universal spiritual relevance.⁴⁷

In other places, Philo translates different geographical locations allegorically. Thus, for example, Egypt represents the Body and Eden communicates Right Reason.⁴⁸ What is Philo to make of the narrative of Babel? There are really no characters to speak of. In addition, he does not utilize Babylon as a symbol in his work—because the location does not appear in the Septuagintal version of the narrative. The concluding etiology does not translate well in the Greek. The builders are scattered from a place called Confusion. Philo will, however, have something to say about the plain of Shinar. Genesis 11, therefore, presents a special set of problems for Philo. He is particularly concerned with the possibility that any “mythical fiction” should be attributed to the writings of Moses. The Tower of Babel is particularly problematic in this regard. Philo begins his discussion—as we begin ours—with a discussion of the mythological context of the tower narrative.

3.1. *A Literal Prologue to the Allegorical Tower* (Conf. 1–13)

Philo begins his treatise, *On the Confusion of Tongues*, with what amounts to an *apologia* for his allegorical reading of the tower narrative.⁴⁹ There are a number of reasons why Philo holds that an allegorical interpretation is not only possible but necessary. He opens, in a rather reactive fashion, by reference to a group of opponents against whom he must argue. This group is comprised of “persons who cherish a dislike of the institutions of our fathers and make it their constant study to denounce and decry the Laws” (Conf. 2). This group is emboldened by the account of the story of Babel because they believe that the narrative demonstrates the presence of mythology in the writings of Moses.⁵⁰ They are quick to point out that “your so-called holy books contain also myths (ἰδοὺ γὰρ αἱ ἱερὰι λεγόμεναι βίβλοι παρ’ ὑμῖν καὶ μύθους περιέχουσιν), which you regularly deride when you

⁴⁷ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁸ See Pearce, *The Land of the Body*.

⁴⁹ Niehoff devotes an entire chapter to Philo’s reading of the Tower of Babel. See Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship*, 77–94.

⁵⁰ Niehoff argues that “these critics must have been Jews, because only they would have been accused by Philo of impiety and annoyance at the ‘ancestral constitution.’” (Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship*, 78).

hear them related by others" (*Conf.* 3) The Babel account, according to this group, is a particularly acute example of the presence of mythology in the Torah.⁵¹ While modern scholars have sought, largely in vain, for ancient Near Eastern comparative materials which might explicate Gen 11, the imagined interlocutors of Philo have no difficulty at all in demonstrating the derivative nature of Babel. They first point to a passage from *The Odyssey* that they characterize as a fable. The Tower of Babel is read as an account of a similar attempt to ascend to the heavens known from Homer. In the Homeric passage, the Aloeidae plan to stack three mountains—Olympus, Ossa and Pelion—on top of each other.⁵² The goal is a familiar one:

(they hoped) that when they were raised to the height of the upper sky they would furnish an easy road to heaven for those who wished to ascend thither.
(*Conf.* 4)

Moses, in his version, substituted the building of a tower for the three mountains in the Homeric version. Maren Niehoff, reconstructing the argument of Philo's debate partners, claims that the "comparative mythology" approach adopted here is meant to highlight the superiority of the Mosaic adoption of myth over the non-Jewish (source) material.

Philo's colleagues discuss the relationship between the known Greek fable and the biblical story in a scholarly manner. Considering the motif of speaking animals to be more mythological than that of humans sharing a common language, they suggest once more that the primitive preceded the rational. Moses was in their view more enlightened than the mythologists.⁵³

In addition, there is the assertion that the goal of both the Aloeidae and the Babelites is impossible. Both the Mosaic and Homeric versions of the narrative present the human agents as guilty of "folly" because in their "insolent pride" they attempted to touch the heaven. Cosmologically, this is an absurdity.

Folly indeed; surely dreadful madness! For if one should lay a small foundation and build up upon it the different parts of the whole earth, rising in the form

⁵¹ Barclay speculates that Philo may have in mind here "Jews whose education had contributed to their disenchantment with their own religious traditions, and who now snipped at the Jewish community from the outside" (Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 109). In contrast to Barclay, Niehoff does not see an external post-Jewish group here, but a rival hermeneutical faction, comfortable with the presence of some mythology in the Torah and keen to utilize extensive allegorical reading and the marginalization of literal and historical approaches.

⁵² *Odyssey* 11:315–318.

⁵³ Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship*, 89.

of a single pillar, it would still be divided by vast distances from the sphere of ether, particularly if we accept the view of the philosophers who inquire into such problems. (Conf. 5)

We have already encountered, in the works of certain modern commentators, the view that the attempt to build a tower that could reach to the heavens is an impossible feat. While modern cosmology may differ from that known to Philo and his audience, the Babelites are judged in a similar manner.

But the story of Babel is not only about a hubristic desire to ascend to the heavens, it is also about language. There is also a mythological counterpart to this component of the Babel narrative. The opponents of Philo are less specific in this regard.⁵⁴ They cite the “writings of the mythologists” which maintain that, at one point in human history, “all the animals had a common language.”

The tale is that in old days all animals ... had the same language ... every creature conversed with every other, about all that happened to be done to them or by them, and in this way they mourned together at misfortunes, and rejoiced together when anything of advantage came their way. For since community of language led them to impart to each other their pleasures and discomforts, both emotions were shared by them in common. (Conf. 6)

This situation came to end, as was all too often the case, because of a serpent. The other animals began to covet the serpent and its (supposed) immortality. They sent an embassy requesting that they, too, might all be immortal.⁵⁵ The request is treated as audacity and the language of the animals is confused. The Mosaic version is seen as an improvement on this fable as it focuses on human language; it is a translation of the animal-myth into a more rational form. Such a translation does not save the Babel account from being mythological, however.

But there are even more troublesome problems with the narrative of Babel. The opponents of Philo note that, in the biblical version, the confusion of language is “brought about as a remedy for sin” (ἐπὶ θεραπείᾳ ... ἀμαρτημάτων) (Conf. 9). The logic of the story—if taken literally—does not follow according to these Scriptural critics. First, the purpose of the linguistic

⁵⁴ Niehoff claims that “the story of the animals common language is otherwise only attested in the work of the Alexandrian poet Callimachus, who presented it as an Aesopic fable ... The original Aesopic version, if it ever existed, is no longer extant” (Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship*, 87).

⁵⁵ Gera, *Ancient Greek Ideas on Speech*, 57–67.

confusion imposed by the deity was to thwart the ability of human beings to work together and “through mutual understanding be partners in iniquity.” The divine therapy, however, did not have the desired effect.

For all the same after they had been separated into different nations and no longer spoke the same tongue, land and sea were full of innumerable evil deeds. For it is not the utterances of men but the presence of the same cravings for sin in the soul which causes combination in wrongdoing. (*Conf.* 10)

The divine punishment does nothing to ameliorate the crimes of the Babelites. The blistering attack from the un-named opponents of Philo does not end with the above observation. The internal logic of the tower narrative—as reconstructed by Philo’s interlocutors—is deconstructed piece by piece. Language diversity does not prevent collusion for sin because

men who have lost their tongue by mutilation do by means of nods and glances and the other attitudes of the body indicate their wishes as well as the uttered word can do it. (*Conf.* 11)

Linguistic diversity, in other words, does not prevent inter-lingual (or even extra-lingual) communication. The dispersion of the people fares no better. Even after being divided into various linguistic groupings, individual nations or peoples are capable of incredible iniquity.

A single nation in which not only language but laws and modes of life are identical often reaches such a pitch of wickedness that its misdeeds can balance the sins of the whole of mankind. (*Conf.* 11)

After demonstrating the inefficacy of the confusion of languages and dispersal of the Babelites (according to a literal reading), the argument continues by highlighting the positive benefits which logically flow from the possession of a common language. Countless misfortunes have befallen a people because they were unable to communicate efficiently enough to foresee a danger. The ability to communicate with another in their native language produces a sense of trust and well-being. The underlying argument is that “the possession of a common language does more good than harm” (*Conf.* 12). The argument has shifted here from one of the mythological nature of the account of Babel to an assertion that the story is flatly illogical. It makes no sense for God to punish the Babelites by confusing their language. The section concludes with the question:

Why ... did God wish to deprive mankind of its universal language as though it were a source of evil, when He should rather have established it firmly as a source of the utmost profit. (*Conf.* 13)

O’Leary contends that such criticism is actually the crux of Philo’s entire argument.

Philo's apologetic purpose is to show that Israel has realized the good more fully than any other group. The Babel story seems to undercut that claim, for it shows a jealous God destroying a city which had achieved a maximum of social harmony.⁵⁶

The Babel narrative presents the foes of Israel in Alexandria with proof of the charge that the Jewish God is fickle and has ordained laws that make the Jews misanthropic and inimical to other civilized peoples who wish to live together in harmony.⁵⁷

What response does Philo have to such a devastating mythological and rationalist critique? Not much of one! He simply claims that he will leave such questions to those who interpret Scripture according to the literal sense. He trusts that such exegetes will "no doubt refute on their own principles the authors of these insidious criticisms" (*Conf.* 14). His approach, however, will be allegorical. Given that Philo records the arguments of the authors of these "insidious criticisms" in some detail, the brief dismissal of their arguments calls for an explanation. I mentioned above that, at least at one point, it was somewhat difficult to disentangle the voice of Philo from the voice of his interlocutors. I believe that the identification of the speaker in the introduction to Philo's allegorical reading of the Babel narrative is intentionally vague. Although it cannot be proven, I hold that Philo is in essential agreement with the argument that he places onto the lips of the un-named others. The two voices merge at certain points in the introduction and it is often difficult to remember that Philo is narrating the arguments of another.⁵⁸ The brief conclusion, given the nature of Philonic rhetoric, is also suspicious. Philo makes the obligatory claim that the charges of the un-named group could (of course) be answered by those exegetes who are concerned with the literal sense. By so claiming, he is spared the obligation of having to actually answer the charges himself. The introduction to Philo's allegorical interpretation of the tower narrative is a tacit approval of the

⁵⁶ O'Leary, "Logos and Koinônia," 255.

⁵⁷ For a discussion of the common Hellenistic canard that Jewish Torah was responsible for misanthropic behavior, see K. Berthelot, *Philanthrôpia Judaica. Le débat autour de la 'misanthropie' des lois juives dans l'Antiquité* (JSJSup 76; Leiden: Brill, 2003); P. Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria*, 243–260; P. Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes towards the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁵⁸ O'Leary points to a similar dynamic with regard to Philo's relationship to the literalist critique of Babel. He refers to another scholar (R. Goulet) who "points out that in *Conf.* 156 Philo recalls as his own an argument attributed to the critics in *Conf.* 5" (O'Leary, "Logos and Koinônia," 256, n. 28).

charges leveled against the narrative from literal expositors. Philo does not attempt to answer these charges because he agrees with them—he just cannot say so explicitly. At the very least, Philo is underscoring the problematic nature of a literal reading in order to argue more strenuously for an allegorical reading of the Babel narrative.

4. *Human Unity as a Symphony of Sin*

It is often difficult to follow the logic and flow of a Philonic treatise. O'Leary goes so far as to claim that "Philo's leisurely and expansive rhythm tries the patience of modern readers"⁵⁹ and that "thematic unity in a Philonic treatise is of a relatively relaxed order, and one errs if one is too anxious to find tightness of structure and motivational interconnections."⁶⁰ Both of these statements may be correct at some level and yet there is a unifying concern present within *On the Confusion of Languages*. O'Leary is the most recent scholar to turn attention to this particular treatise of Philo.⁶¹ He offers a succinct exegesis of Philo's main line of argumentation with regard to the narrative of Babel.

The quest for authentic *koinônia* and the role of *logos*, as language, argument, reason and as the *Logos* of God, in securing the stability of *koinônia* are the guiding concerns of the treatise, which deals with the *logos*-battle between true and false *koinônia*.⁶²

The quote from O'Leary makes clear that the focal point of the treatise is on *koinônia* and the impact that *logos*—inflected and translated in a plurality of ways—has on the perseverance of *koinônia*. In this context, *koinônia* treats various forms of unity and the purposes for which unity is sought.⁶³ Babel, according to this reading, represents a negative valuation of unity, a unity born of human striving for impious and foolish gains, founded on corrupted

⁵⁹ O'Leary, "Logos and Koinônia," 257.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 254.

⁶¹ The only work approaching a full-length commentary on the *Confusion of Tongues* is by J.G. Kahn, *Les oeuvres de Philon d'Alexandrie. Volume 13: De confusione de linguarum* (Paris: Cerf, 1961.) There is also a brief treatment in C. Uehlinger, *Weltreich und 'Eine Rede': Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauergeschichte (Gen 11, 19)* (OBO 101; Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 153–172.

⁶² O'Leary, "Logos and Koinônia," 254.

⁶³ O'Leary opens his treatment of *Confusion* with the following definition of *koinônia*: "Longing for communion (*koinônia*) with the divine is perhaps the most insistent theme of Hellenistic religious thought" (O'Leary, "Logos and Koinônia," 245).

and corrupting language. This is all in contrast to the true unity which is achieved by those who study the philosophy of Moses. My own reading of *On the Confusion of Tongues* is greatly informed by the reading of O'Leary. My line of approach, however, is to draw out with greater focus and clarity the actual interpretive moves made by Philo in his reading of Gen 11:1–9. I focus attention primarily by examining the ways in which Philo deploys *co-texts from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible* to construct interpretive edifices for reading Babel, as well as exploring how he integrates the allegorized narrative into his larger system of Mosaic philosophy. O'Leary's reading focuses on the underlying message conveyed by Philo the Jewish philosopher. My own reading is concerned as much with *hermeneutical process* as it is with *exegetical product*. Philo has a philosophical and political goal towards which he is aiming—yet his means of argumentation is firmly grounded in precise words drawn from the Hebrew Bible. My focus, therefore, is upon Philo the exegete.

4.1. *A Tuneless Symphony (Gen 11:1 and Conf. 14–59)*

Philo opens his exposition of the first verse of the Babel narrative with a radical translation of the phrase שָׁפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים. The reference to a singular lip is retained (in the LXX translation of χεῖλος), while the second portion of the phrase is changed to voice/φωνή. Philo will make use of both terms in his allegorical rendering of the Babel narrative. He opens with a foundational statement: “We suggest then that by the words ‘the whole earth was all one lip and one voice’ is meant a consonance (συμφωνία) of evil deeds great and innumerable” (*Conf.* 15). In this assertion, Philo introduces a term which will be of enormous consequence for his subsequent reading of Babel: συμφωνία. Philo's use of the term is, of course, predicated upon a translational choice to read דְּבָרִים as φωνή.

This symphony of evil deeds takes place at two levels: the political and the psychological. It is the later which is of primary interest to Philo in the remainder of his exposition of Babel; although, from time to time, the political implications of his rhetoric are all too clear. Philo generally reads the narrative as an allegory of the individual human soul and “the vast multitude of ills which are found in the individual man, especially when the unison of voices (συμφωνία) within him is a disharmony tuneless and unmusical” (*Conf.* 15). It is consistent with Philo's allegorical commentary on the book of Genesis to treat each of the narratives as allegorically speaking of the inner life of the virtue seeking human soul. Pearce claims that:

the idea that the Pentateuch is, at its deepest level of meaning, concerned with the fate of the soul and with its journey towards the world of God, is ... fundamental in Philo.⁶⁴

This is the great paradox of Philo's presentation of Babelian unity: the symphony of languages spoken does not produce anything melodic or pleasing, only discordance.

Philo continues by exploring the influence of various ills on the mind and body. He makes use of a simple aphorism: "When the guards fall, that which they guard must fall too" (*Conf.*18). He goes on to catalogue these ills which are the numerous misfortunes, vicissitudes of life, which might lead the soul astray from virtue and truth. His true goal, however, is to move to an understanding of Gen 11:1. The opening passage of Babel refers to the complete corruption of the human soul when all parts of the human being work together in unison to accomplish evil.

While these calamities of fortune which work independently of us are full of pain and misery, they are far outweighed in comparison with those which spring from deliberate volition. (*Conf.* 20)

It is possible for human beings to contribute to the total corruption of their own souls.

A prerequisite for appreciating what follows is an understanding of Philo's theological anthropology. He holds that the human soul is composed of three separate elements; the mind (νοῦς or λόγος), the spirit (θυμός), and the appetite (ἐπιθυμία).⁶⁵ Philo believes that each portion of the human soul is susceptible to being misled and each part is capable of misleading other portions. For Philo, "one lip and one voice" is an allegorical description of all parts of the human soul working in tandem to bring about the abandonment of virtue, the pursuit of vice, and the destruction of the soul. The Tower of Babel is ultimately a narrative of *psychic suicide*. Philo uses two metaphors—that of a boat whose crew, passengers, and helmsman all conspired to sink it and that of a plague stricken city wherein even physicians

⁶⁴ Pearce, *The Land of the Body*, 30. She quotes with approval the work of Nikiprowetsky: "Migration is the spiritual journey which leads the soul of the wise person or the consecrated people as a whole, from flesh to spirit, from the material world with its shadows and passions, to the light of the intelligible world, from slavery in Egypt to freedom in Canaan, land of virtue and city of God" (Nikiprowetsky, *Le Commentaire*, 239). Pearce claims that "by recognizing the centrality of this theme, Nikiprowetsky decisively disposed of the idea that Philo's thinking lacks any fundamental coherence" (Pearce, *The Land of the Body*, 31, n. 178).

⁶⁵ For the Platonic background to this view see, *Rep.* 437b and 580d.

succumb to sickness—to communicate the absolute depravity of the soul when all parts work together (with one voice) for their mutual destruction. The remainder of Philo's reading of the tower narrative will assume this larger interpretive framework and seek to make sense of individual verses as part of an overarching allegorical narrative of the corruption of the soul and the response of the divine to such corruption.

Philo asserts that the argument he is making with regard to the tower narrative—that it is an allegory for the self-destruction of the human soul—is a concern found throughout the Torah. Other passages testify to the same dynamic. These passages are *co-texts* for Philo's understanding of the Babel narrative. Each citation by Philo is meant to draw the narrative of Babel closer to another analogous passage in the Torah, thereby allowing the texts to interpret one another. In one passage, for example, Philo presents the Deluge as a complete flooding of the human soul with evil.

For the deluge was a letting loose of sins, a rushing torrent of iniquity where there was none to hinder, but all things burst forth without restraint to supply abundant opportunities to those who were all readiness to take pleasure therein. (Conf. 25)

The people (or the soul) receive a punishment that fits the crime; God gives them up to their desires and sin inundates them. Corruption overtakes completely. (Philo will return to this image at the close of the present treatise.) But how is the soul corrupted and why is the narrative of Babel relevant?⁶⁶ Philo enters into a discussion on the nature and function of speech itself—perhaps not surprisingly so in a treatise entitled the *Confusion of Tongues*. In three biblical episodes—the Deluge, the narration of Abram's battle with the Canaanite kings in Gen 14, and the Sodomites' assault on the visitors to Lot in Gen 19—Philo attempts to demonstrate the power of a unified offensive to work evil. In each passage, there is a reference to the *totality* of those involved in the offense. In Gen 6:5–6, the divine voice states that “every (πᾶς) man carefully purposes in his heart evil things.” Genesis 14:3 reads: “All these (πάντες) came to the salt-ravine; this is the salt sea.” The enemies of Abram—a figure whom Philo lauds as “wise”—are presented as completely unified in

⁶⁶ We have already noted numerous times, and will have further occasion to note, the connection between the narrative of the Deluge and the account of the Tower of Babel. For Philo they are both analogous on the allegorical level. It is not beyond possibility that his allegorical linking of the two accounts was founded on his knowledge of a pre-existing non-allegorical link between the two passages in contemporary Jewish circles. There is, of course, no way prove such a claim.

their assault. Once again, the language of Scripture is important. "Thus we read, 'all these joined their voices (πάντες οἱ συνφώνησαν) to come to the salt ravine'" (Gen 14:3 in *Conf.* 26). The term συνφώνησαν is adduced in order to strengthen the parallel to Babel. Philo, further, understands a salt-ravine to be an appropriate location for vice and passion.⁶⁷ The visit of the angels to Sodom is also marked by totalizing language. Philo makes a point of noting that Scripture itself employs the language of totality: "For we read that not merely some but 'the whole people (ὁ λαός) surrounded the house, young and old'" (Gen 19:4 at *Conf.* 28). The assault noted in Gen 19 is unified against some principle even greater than Abram, however:

the whole people ... ran round and round the house of the soul to bring dishonor and ruin on those sacred and holy Thoughts (ἱεροὺς καὶ ὁσίους λόγους) which were its guests, its guardians and sentinels. (*Conf.* 27)

There is an important hermeneutical move to be noted here: with the citation of each biblical co-text there is an *increase in the number of affiliations* with the narrative of Babel. Philo weaves these texts into an increasingly tighter fabric. The passage from Gen 6 is a text which points to a *general principle* that Scripture connected unity language with total corruption. The second passage portrays a unified front against the wisdom embodied in Abram and utilizes the key term φωνή. The final text presents a unity of action for evil against the very incarnation of divine wisdom, the *logos*, meant to protect the human soul from destruction. Philo's philosophical theory is firmly grounded in the textuality of the revelation to Moses and such

exegetical anchoring prevents Philo from sustaining abstract discussion of ethical principles. He seems to have had little taste for constructing such discussions, content instead to cleave to the text, as a preacher.⁶⁸

But there is some tension present, for, at the same time, Philo's selection of co-texts for the Babel story is clearly dependent on a pre-existing philosophical framework. Preacher and Philosopher co-exist and co-mingle.

The question assumed in this collocation of Scriptural examples is simple: Is there no power which is capable of resisting such unified force and speech? For Philo, the answer is a resounding 'Yes.' Mosaic philosophy is the

⁶⁷ In a manner similar to Philo's translation of "Shinar," Philo holds that the salt-ravine is an apt place for those who are opposed to wise Abram. "For the place of vices and passions is hollow and rough and ravine-like; salt indeed, and bitter are the pangs which it brings" (*Conf.* 26).

⁶⁸ O'Leary, "Logos and Koinônia," 259.

only therapy, the only antidote for the soul. He makes this theoretical argument through the explication of a biblical passage which, at first, may appear to have very little to do with the Babel narrative: an encounter between Moses and Pharaoh. Moses—as prophet of God and purveyor of superior philosophy—is well prepared to do battle with the forces that threaten the human soul. Philo claims that

Moses shall meet and stem the strong current of their boldness, though setting before them as their king their boldest and most cunning eloquence, they come rushing with united onset, though they mass their wealth of water and their tide is as the tide of the river. (Conf. 29)

Those who oppose Moses (and Mosaic philosophy) are especially skilled at the manipulation of language it would seem. Philo is presenting a philosophical battle, an important interpretive *topos* for this treatise: speech versus speech.⁶⁹ It is important to understand that, for Philo, Moses and the King of Egypt are not simply biblical characters or historical figures. They represent other, deeper, realities. Moses is the embodiment of divinely revealed Wisdom itself, while Egypt and its Pharaoh are carnal nature.⁷⁰ The appearance of these two characters in proximity is meant to teach something about the deeper reality of the relationship between Wisdom and the power and weakness of the Body.

At this point Philo grounds his allegorical argument in the Torah. Exodus 7:15 reads: “The King of Egypt comes to the water, but thou shalt stand meeting him at the edge of the river” (Conf. 29). The literal meaning of the text recounts an attempt by Moses to encourage Pharaoh to release the children of Israel from bondage. The allegorical meaning, however, is quite different. The King of Egypt is the personification of “cunning eloquence” (θρασύτατον) that lacks all truth. Philo works exegetically on this passage in two ways. First, he notes the use of two verbs which might be taken to be contradictory—stand and meet. “Meet involves the idea of motion

⁶⁹ Pearce points to the recurrence of this theme throughout Philo's work. So, for example, “the victory of Moses and Aaron over the ‘sophists of Egypt’ functions primarily as an example which demonstrates the necessary function of rhetoric and the right use of its skill in the fight against the misleading arguments of the sophists. The theme is developed at length in *Det.* 34–35 and *Migr.* 72–84 in connection with the interpretation of the fatal encounter between Cain and Abel: their meeting represents a contest of eristic skills” (Pearce, *The Land of the Body*, 164). The Babelites will be variously associated with Egypt, as well as with the narrative of Cain and Abel by Philo.

⁷⁰ See *Migr.* 28 and 151; *Her.* 293, 313–315; *Somn.* 2.255. For a discussion concerning the image of Pharaoh, see Pearce, *The Land of the Body*, esp. 137–159.

and stand call up the thought of rest" (*Conf.* 32). This paradox is overcome through allegory as the one who is firmly *grounded* in true (Mosaic) philosophy will be able *to meet* the arguments of those cunning, eloquent, yet false philosophers whose teachings threaten the human soul. Moses is the prototype for such divinely granted eloquence. But why refer to this particular passage and how does it possibly relate to the Tower of Babel?

There is, first of all, a lexical link through the common usage of the term χεῖλος which bears the triple meaning of lip/edge/shore in Greek (as well as in its Hebrew counterpart). It is, perhaps, this term which drew Philo's attention.⁷¹ Wisdom and Carnal Knowledge meet at the edge of speech. An even deeper connection exists, however. The river itself is an image of speech.

It is well indeed that the opponents should meet on the lip or edge of the river. The lips are the boundaries of the mouth and a kind of a hedge to the tongue and through them the stream of speech passes, when it begins its downward flow. (*Conf.* 33)

Both Exod 7:15 and Gen 11:1 are, therefore, about the power of speech in the battle between truth and falsehood. Speech, according to a Philonic reading, is not an unalloyed good. It is "an ally employed by those who hate virtue and love the passions," but it is used "also by men of worth for the destruction of such doctrines" (*Conf.* 34). Moses, Philo holds, is more than a match for the sophistry of the King of Egypt. It is no surprise that, following the confrontation at the Sea of Reeds, the Egyptians meet their end on the edge of the Sea. "For Israel, it says, saw the Egyptians dead on the edge of the Sea (τὸ χεῖλος τοῦ ποταμοῦ)—not elsewhere" (Exod 14:30 in *Conf.* 36). Philo explains that this is not a natural death which is referred to, but the silencing of impious doctrines. O'Leary states that "unholy speech or arguments (logos) are the cement of Babel."⁷²

To this point Philo has presented an image of the philosophical contest as a battle between the King of Egypt and Moses. Although Israel follows the teaching and philosophy of Moses, Philo is aware that not all Israel will have the capability to refute eloquent sophistic arguments and withstand the concomitant assault on the soul. For such people, "the support of the Solely Wise Being" is required (*Conf.* 39). It is such a soul—a disciple of Moses—who prays "let their cunning lips become speechless" (Ps 31:19 in

⁷¹ Philo makes use of the same text in *On Dreams* 2:277–278.

⁷² O'Leary, "*Logos and Koinônia*," 259.

Conf. 39).⁷³ In the confrontation between Mosaic philosophy and sophism, Philo holds that each and every soul must make a choice.

Let us flee, then, without a backward glance from the unions which are unions for sin, but hold fast to our alliance with the comrades of good sense and knowledge. (*Conf.* 40)

The battle lines have been drawn—one must cast one's lot.

Philo continues by providing an analysis of biblical texts which point to the unity of speech which is marked by adherence to the Mosaic philosophy and its constant antagonism to the arguments of those whose doctrines would bring about the ruin of the human soul. Philo presents an anti-type to the figure of the Babelites with his citation of Gen 42:11 as an example of unity for good. The text is drawn from the narrative of the brothers of Joseph and their descent to Egypt for food during a time of famine. "We are all sons of one man, we are peaceful." In contradiction to the builders of the tower who abuse unity of speech for reasons harmful to the human soul, the speakers in Gen 42 are unified for a just reason.

Those who rejoice in the oneness of their blood and honor one father, right reason (τὸν ὁρθὸν λόγον), reverence that concert of virtues, which is full of harmony and melody, and live a life of calmness and fair weather. (*Conf.* 43)

The description of unity in this passage is in marked opposition to Philo's initial interpretation of Gen 11:1. In that case, the unity of language was marked by a συμφωνία that was "tuneless and unmusical." In this later case, unity of speech is full of harmony and melody. Such unity is defined as "peace."⁷⁴ The notion of peace, however, should not detract from the constant battle being waged between true and false philosophy. "War on behalf of peace," states O'Leary, "is the invigorating element in which this treatise moves. The unity of the just under the *Logos* is that of an army, and that of a family."⁷⁵ Philo must hold in tension his presentation of Israel and Mosaic

⁷³ I would note that in the midst of a highly complex allegorical argument, Philo turns his attention to those whom he considers incapable of reasoned philosophical refutation of corrupt philosophy and suggests that the *language of worship* is a suitable substitute for the sort of learned refutation possible to the philosophically inclined. All people, regardless of their intellectual capabilities, have been granted by the divine the ability to attain to virtue and reject vice.

⁷⁴ There is, perhaps, a veiled reflection here of an exegetical tradition that the Babelites—despite their unity of language—were not entirely at peace with one another. True peace, so says Philo, comes about only through following the Torah of Moses.

⁷⁵ O'Leary, "*Logos and Koinōnia*," 260.

philosophy as “peaceful” with the constant antagonism of such philosophy to the standards and values of Hellenistic—and particularly Egyptian—thought.

For it is the nature of men of peace that they prove to be men of war, when they take the field to resist those who would subvert the stability of the soul.
(*Conf.* 43)

The remainder of Philo’s discussion of Gen 11:1 is concerned with examples—from Jeremiah to Phinehas—of how the disciples of Moses are ever opposed to false philosophy. At the close of the section, he offers two images which are instructive of his larger argument. In one passage, he claims that the human being has the ability to succumb to sense perceptions and desires.

He who contradicts none of these, but assents to all as they come before him, is unconsciously deceiving himself and raising up a stronghold of dangerous neighbors to menace the soul, neighbors who should be dealt with as subjects, not as rulers.
(*Conf.* 54)

The unmusical symphony which he speaks of at the beginning of his discussion of Gen 11:1 is not an anomaly perpetrated by a completely reprobate humanity or a completely corrupted human soul. The absolute corruption of the individual human soul is a possibility—an ever present danger—for any human being. The only known cure to prevent the conspiracy of all parts of the human soul in iniquity is the Mosaic Law. One is only permitted to speak with ‘one voice’ provided that it is the voice of Moses. O’Leary senses a political undercurrent in this regard: “Jewish *koinônia* has to be defended against what on the surface looks like an equally valid *koinônia*, that of Egyptian society.”⁷⁶ The line between allegory and political polemic is thinner than it seems. For Philo, Egyptian (or, more generally, Hellenistic) ‘unity’ is always bound to be imperfect and unstable because it does not derive from the ultimate stability of the revealed Law of Moses. The people of Israel must always be at war with such instability.

Philo, before moving to his discussion of Gen 11:2, presents one more counter-image to the unity of Babel. The people of Israel, newly liberated from the bondage of Egypt, stand at the mountain of revelation.

But most wonderful of all, exceeding every harmony, is that united universal symphony (ἡ κοινὴ πάντων) in which we find the whole people declaring with one heart, “*All that God has said we will do and hear.*” (Exod 19:8 at *Conf.* 58)

⁷⁶ O’Leary, “*Logos and Koinônia*,” 260.

Philo multiplies the language of unity and harmony and asserts that the response of the people of Israel to the revelation of the Law to Moses surpasses any other form of unity and harmony. In fact, the unity here is even more marked by its miraculous nature. The people engage in a strange inversion. “For other men act after they have heard, but these under divine inspiration say ... that they will act first and hear later” (*Conf.* 59). Babel and Sinai are two types of Unity or *Koinônia* which are destined to remain locked in eternal, metaphysical combat.

4.2. *Dwelling in Shinar* (Gen 11:2 and *Conf.* 60–82)

The exegetical thread of Philo’s argument continues with a focus on three elements present in Gen 11:2: the import of the phrase “from the East,” the etymological significance of the term Shinar, and a distinction between ‘dwelling’ and ‘sojourning’ in a particular location. With regard to each element, Philo will proffer a number of co-texts which will have implications for understanding Babel. In two of the cases, he will also make a distinction between positive and negative, true or counterfeit, examples of the allegorical meaning of a specific term. In all cases, Philo’s arguments are always connected by and grounded in the language of Scripture.

The first term of importance for Philo is one we have encountered before. We noted above that the Hebrew phrase **מִמֶּזְרָח** is problematic. The Greek translation of the phrase, while less linguistically problematic, permits Philo to postulate the condition of the human soul *before* it embarks on its downward spiral. The phrase “ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν” is translated “from the East.” The geographical location East, however, receives its name from what occurs in the East: the rising of the sun. The conflation of the two meanings of the term allows Philo to allegorize. Once again, however, Philo views “rising” (like speech) as a mixed term.

There are two kinds of ‘rising’ in the soul, the better and the worse. The better is when the beam of the virtues rises like the rays of the sun; the worse when virtues pass into the shadow and vices rise above the horizon. (*Conf.* 61)

For Philo, there is no neutrality within the soul: either vice or virtue is always on the rise. Philo varies his rhetorical style by anchoring the section with a reference to an image of positive rising in the Hebrew Bible. He cites the account of the creation of the Garden of Eden:

“And God planted a pleasaunce (παράδεισον) in Eden towards the sun-rise (κατὰ ἀνατολᾶς).” That garden was not a garden of the plants of the soil, but of heavenly virtues. (Gen 2:8 in *Conf.* 61–62)

A positive counter-type to the Babelites is posited. He continues by citing a passage from the prophet Zechariah: “Behold a man whose name is ‘the rising’” (ἰδοὺ ἄνθρωπος ὃ ὄνομα ἀνατολή) (Zech 6:12 at *Conf.* 62). In the passage, which Philo describes as an “oracle from the lips of a disciple of Moses,” the term rising is applied to a figure Philo associates with the “Incorporeal one, who differs not a whit from the divine image” (*Conf.* 62). Philo is so brief as to require explanation. In its original context, the passage points to an individual (named “The Branch” [תִּבְרָךְ] according to the Hebrew) who is given the authority to rebuild the Temple. “He shall build the temple of the Lord and shall assume majesty, and he shall sit on his throne and rule” (Zech 6:13). Philo translates this post-exilic prophecy relating to the re-establishment of the Davidic line and temple into an oracle concerning the *Logos* acting with the authority of the divine. “He shall sit on his throne and rule” could, conceivably, refer to the *Logos* as the active principle or God at work in the universe. The true form of rising is associated here with the *Logos*.⁷⁷ Language and Rising (and building as well) intersect in Zechariah in a manner that is the inverse of what is found in Babel.

A key example of the ‘worse’ form of rising is found in Balaam and his attempt to curse Israel. Once again, Philo pays careful attention to the language of Scripture. Balaam is envisioned as “dwelling at the rising (ἀνατολαῖς)” (*Conf.* 64). Balak, furthermore, summons Balaam to curse Israel “from the East” (ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν; Num 23:7–8). Consistent with Philo’s association of biblical figures with spiritual traits, he defines Balak as the very epitome of foolishness at *Conf.* 65. He further develops his understanding of foolish rising of vice in the soul by noting that Balaam is said to dwell in Μεσοποταμίαν. Balaam, the one called to curse Israel, is associated with the same allegorical substance as Pharaoh and the Egyptian army—water. Philo claims that “this is the reason why Balaam also dwells in ‘Mid-river-land,’ for his understanding is submerged in the midmost depths of a river” (*Conf.* 66). I would note, in addition, that Philo has already associated water itself with language and the speech practices of those who argue against divine wisdom as embodied in the Torah of Moses (*Conf.* 33). Balaam, in his “rising” to vice, is a type of those who drown in their own insidious arguments and are, in fact, “unable to swim ... upward and lift (their) head above the surface” (*Conf.* 67). Philo concludes this brief discussion by stating that “these makers of music whose harmony is disharmony moved ... ‘from the rising.’”

⁷⁷ O’Leary, “*Logos* and *Koinônia*,” 262.

Given that Philo has isolated what he takes to be an exegetical key from interpreting Gen 11:2, he is faced with a problem. Philo is clear that the association of 'rising' with the builders of Babel cannot be meant in a positive fashion. He is certain of the Babelites' character. It is a matter of debate, however, if Gen 11:2 is pointing to a "rising of virtue ... or the rising of vice" (*Conf.* 67). Either interpretation is possible and will redound negatively to the tower builders. They are either moving *away* from a positive rising of virtue or they are *starting* their journey in a place where vice and foolishness arise.⁷⁸ "For the place where vice is located serves as the initial starting-point for the fool for those activities which defy nature" (*Conf.* 68). Philo is able to allow the term 'rising' to retain allegorical polyvalence, all the while suggesting that *either* meaning points to the unnatural and foolish nature of the builders.

Philo retains his focus on the language of the biblical text with his discussion of the destination of the Babelites in their movement from virtue to vice. It is another common feature of allegorical argumentation for place names to be granted specific allegorical relevance. The plain of Shinar is no exception.

Now all who have wandered away from virtue and accepted the starting points of folly, find and dwell in a most suitable place, a place which in the Hebrew tongue is called Shinar and in our own 'shaking out' (ὅς δὲ Ἑβραίων μὲν γλώττῃ Σενάαρ, Ἑλλήνων δὲ ἐκτιναγμός καλεῖται).⁷⁹ (*Conf.* 68)

We encounter a specific problem with the interpretation of Philo in this regard. As we have stated, the majority of scholars hold that Philo's exegetical work is dependent upon the Septuagint. He is clearly drawing on some etymological traditions, however, which rely on an acquaintance with Hebrew.⁸⁰ In the present case, Philo is treating Shinar as a derivative of the Hebrew root שָׁנַר. It is a matter of some debate whence Philo's etymological knowledge of Hebrew. At any rate, Philo suggests that Shinar signifies 'shaking out' in both the Hebrew and Greek language. While the etymology

⁷⁸ See Chapter Eight, below, for an analogous approach to the phrase מִן הַמִּדְבָּר in rabbinic midrash.

⁷⁹ For some reason, the translators correct Philo's Greek to suggest that the exegete associates himself with the Greek language in contrast to the Hebrew language. The text of Philo simply states "in the Hebrew language ... in the Greek language ..."

⁸⁰ The etymology is most likely traditional. In order to derive such a meaning, however, the letter *shin* must be dropped. Grabbe, *Etymology in Early Jewish Interpretation*, 202–203. Grabbe lists a parallel to Philo's etymology in Origen *Against Celsus* 5:30 and at *b. Zeb.* 13b.

of the geographical location, Shinar, may be a traditional one, it provides Philo with another exegetical opening. The Greek term which Philo uses to explain the significance of Shinar is ἐκτινάσσω. Philo clarifies why he believes this term to be an apt association for the settlement of the Babelites.

For all the life of the fools is torn and hustled and shaken, ever in chaos and disturbance, and keeping no trace of genuine good treasured in it ... when a man has conspired for wrongdoing, his soul is subject to a 'shaking out', for it casts away every form of good so that no shadow or semblance of it can be seen at all. (Conf. 69)

The location of the Babelites on the *plain* of Shinar also tells the allegorist something significant about their character. While Philo is content in the present treatise to explore the meaning of Shinar, he examines the allegorical importance of the term plain/πεδῖον in another treatise—*That the Worse is Wont to Attack the Better*. This treatise treats the biblical account of Cain and Abel as an example of a general rule. The treatise opens with a quote from Gen 4:8:

And Cain said to Able his brother, 'Let us make our way to the plain.' And it came to pass when they were on the plain that Cain rose up against his brother and killed him.⁸¹

The location of the fratricide is of great importance for Philo. He states that "the plain is a figure of contest and desperate battle" (*Worse* 1). Philo continues by cataloguing a list of biblical passages where he sees a contest of some sort taking place on a plain (e.g., Gen 31:4–5; Gen 37).⁸² In a manner reminiscent of his reading of the contest between Moses and Pharaoh, Philo holds that the Torah dramatizes as a physical battle between two brothers what is in actuality a struggle between rival philosophies.

What Cain is aiming at is, by means of a challenge, to draw Able into a dispute, and to gain mastery over him by plausible sophistries that have the appearance of truth. (*Worse* 2)

All 'plains' have the allegorical possibility of being venues for the contest between true and false philosophy.

⁸¹ Philo either ignores, or more likely does not know, that the Hebrew text (MT) of Gen 4:8 is infamous for a lacuna at precisely this point. The location of Cain's act of fratricide in Hebrew, moreover, is not a בִּקְעָה (plain) but a שָׂדֶה (field). The Hebrew text would have precluded Philo from creating an allegorical correlation between the narrative of Babel and the Cain and Abel story.

⁸² Oddly, Philo makes no mention of the narrative of Babel in *Worse*.

Returning to the significance of the term Shinar in *Confusion*, Philo continues by introducing yet another biblical text. Once again, Philo makes use of the famous account of the salvation of the Israelites at the Sea of Reeds. Exodus 14:27, in the Septuagintal version, states that “he shook off (ἐξετίναξε) the Egyptians in the midst of the sea, fleeing under the water” (*Conf.* 70). Each element of this verse is important for Philo. The Egyptians, as we have already seen, are those who are subject to the body and its passions. In a manner similar to the Philonic reading of the Balak/Balaam passage from Numbers, an association is made with water (allegorically representing the passions on this occasion) in the same passage. “He shook off the Egyptians in the midst of the sea, fleeing under the water” (Exod 14:27 at *Conf.* 70). The Egyptians as lovers of the body are depicted as flying “under the water” (ὕπὸ τὸ ὕδωρ). The co-text from Exod 14 is used to bind these key exegetical terms together with the sense of “shaking out.” Philo is able to weave an increasing number of texts together in his portrayal of the builders of Babel. Scripture bristles with insight into the nature of the tower builders if one has ears to hear. The passage from Exodus permits Philo to expound upon what constitutes the “shaking out” of the soul. The Babelites are the same as the Egyptians and will meet the same end.

Having established the importance of the terms plain and Shinar, Philo continues by exploiting the particular language associated with them.

Again observe that he does not say that they came to the plain in which they stayed, but that only after full search and exploration they found the spot that was fittest for folly. (*Conf.* 75)

Whereas the biblical text does not comment on why the Babelites chose the plain of Shinar, Philo provides both a rationale for their choice and the allegorical significance of it. For Philo, the location of the tower is as important as the building project itself. Indeed, the character of the tower builders can be determined from their relationship to the land to which they migrate. The Babelites not only find the plain, they dwell (κατῴκησαν) there. Their intent is to set up permanent residence.

For were it a passing visit they would have departed in course of time; their dwelling there was sure evidence of a permanent stay. This is why all whom Moses calls wise are represented as sojourners. Their souls are never colonists leaving heaven for a new home. (*Conf.* 76–77)

Philo contrasts this “dwelling” with “sojourning” in a catenation of biblical texts. Abraham claims that “I am a stranger and a sojourner (παρρηλικός καὶ παρεπίδημός εἰμι ἐγὼ μεθ’ ὑμῶν) with you” in Gen 23:4. Jacob says: “The days of the years of my life, the days which I sojourn (παρρωιῶ), have been few

and evil” during the blessing of his children in Gen 47:9. The case of Isaac is a little more complex. Philo chooses to quote Gen 27:3. In the passage, God speaks to Isaac and says: “Go not down into Egypt ... but dwell in the land that I say to thee.” Isaac, it would seem, is the type of the Wise who eschews any association with Egypt-Body and dwells only where God directs. The divine command continues, however, with the order to “sojourn in this land” (παροίκει ἐν τῇ γῇ ταύτῃ) (Gen 26:2–3 at *Conf.* 81). Isaac is commanded both to dwell and to sojourn only in the land of Promise. The important exegetical point Philo wishes to make is a demonstration that the patriarchs all had the language of “sojourning” associated with them. Yet, Philo offers one more example as a hermeneutical *coup de grâce*: the figure of Moses provides Philo with his strongest argument that the truly wise are always sojourners. Moses, Philo argues, was totally alienated from the body and the world—more so than any of the patriarchs. It is Moses who says: “I am an outlander [sojourner] in an alien land” (γειώρας ... εἰμι γῇ ἀλλοτρίᾳ) (Exod 2:22 at *Conf.* 82). Moses is more spiritually advanced than even the patriarchs according to Philo.

His tenancy of the body is not to him merely that of the foreigner as immigrant settlers count it. To alienate himself from it, never to count it as his own, is to give it its due. (*Conf.* 82)

The Babelites are the anti-type to those individuals—the patriarchs and Moses—who are said to have sojourned in other lands. The wise are only visitors—never tenants.

Their way is to visit earthly nature as men who travel abroad to see and learn. So when they have stayed awhile in their bodies, and beheld through them all that sense and morality have to shew, they make their way back to the place from which they set out first. (*Conf.* 78)

We do not see here a full blown renunciation of physical life—the body is not treated simply as a tomb. It should be noted that there is some value given in the above quote to the tenancy in the body—there is something to see and learn. The danger is that one might become enamored of sensory existence and forget one’s true home. The body and its passions are not evil *per se*. They must, however, be kept in check and treated as servants not as sovereigns. It is the sin of the Babelites that they not only allow such passions to overtake the soul, but that they actually rejoice in such a situation.

O’Leary presents a more historical understanding of Philo’s discussion of sojourning versus dwelling. He situates Philo’s philosophical approach within the reality of the political station of Jews living in Alexandrian Egyptian society.

Against the security of Babel, the security of the established world, Philo pits a security grounded on the intelligible world, which is given communicative and social character, as a homeland to which God calls his people.⁸³

In fact, the consistent comparison of the Babelites with the Egyptians is no mistake. “The reference to immigrant settlers and their continued identification with their homeland suggest the Philo is urging the Jewish community not to feel at home in Egypt,” claims O’Leary, “but to bear their true homeland in mind, not Palestine but the Platonic world of ideas, refashioned as the true Israel.”⁸⁴

4.3. *The Soul in Inextricable Confusion* (Gen 11:3 and Conf. 83–106)

Human depravity and divine grace are the opposing forces with regard to Philo’s reading of Gen 11:3. He opens his interpretation with the observation that words lead to deeds: “Now the wicked man wishes to display his unity of voice and speech through fellowship in unjust deeds rather than in actual words” (Conf. 83).

Philo examines the image of bricks as a concrete symbol for the unity of unjust deeds. We saw above (Chapter One) that the mention of bricks has been utilized by some modern expositors as evidence for the ‘foreign’ origin of the Babel narrative and the Israelite point-of-view it presumes. Philo—in typical fashion—reads the call to produce bricks allegorically and places the call into his larger narrative of the corruption of the human soul. In his analysis of the previous verse, he uses the term found and an etymological understanding of the location Shinar as exegetical loci to suggest the underlying disposition of the Babelites and the deeper reality to which they point. Philo here begins to discuss the actual mechanics of how the disorder and death of the soul can come about.

“Come, let us make bricks and burn them with fire.” The phrase might seem rather innocuous. Philo, however, is working with larger notions of the human soul wherein the natural state of the soul is one of mixture. “At present we have all the contents of the soul in inextricable confusion (συγκεχυμένα τὰ πάντα τῆς ψυχῆς), so that no clear form of any particular kind is discernible” (Conf. 84). This mixed state of the soul calls forth an appropriate response.⁸⁵ Philo asserts that,

⁸³ O’Leary, “*Logos and Koinônia*,” 263.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Philo utilizes the same word for “confusion” that appears at the end of his treatise. The divine punishment of Babel, therefore, does nothing more than return the soul to its original state of confusion.

Our right course is to take the passions and vices, which at present is a substance devoid of form and quality, and divide it by continuous analysis into the proper categories and subdivisions ... till we reach the ultimate.

(*Conf.* 85)

The relevant and exegetically interesting point of the above quote is the assertion by Philo that passion and vice are “without form” (μηδενός εἴδους)—they are elements of the human soul to be divided and conquered, becoming ever weaker in the process. The opposite approach is imagined as the true significance of the Babelites’ call to produce bricks; the vices and passions are given form so they the soul may mount an assault against virtue. Such an undertaking, however, requires careful and deliberate planning.

The firmest foundation for such success will be to give form to the formless by assigning them definite shapes and figures and to distinguish them in each case by separate limitations.

(*Conf.* 87)

Philo—relying on ancient geometrical conceptions—uses the square as the model for absolute stability. The Babelites shape the vices and passions into a stable and manageable form in order to threaten virtue and righteousness; this is the true meaning of the call to produce bricks. Philo quickly shifts, however, to an intertextual reading of Gen 11:3 to buttress his allegorical reading. The programmatic statement in this regard is his claim that:

every mind that sets itself up against God (τούτων πᾶς ὁ ἀντίθεος νοῦς), the mind which we call the King of Egypt, proves to be a maker of such structures. For Moses describes Pharaoh as rejoicing in the buildings constructed of brick.⁸⁶

(*Conf.* 88)

The term of importance here is πλίνθος. Although he does not state his exegetical reasoning explicitly, Philo (as a close reader of Scripture) has heard the resonance of the term bricks and deduced a particular moral context in which the term occurs.⁸⁷ For the intertextual move to work, however, Philo’s allegorization of the King of Egypt as the personification of all that is

⁸⁶ Philo is consistent in his equation of biblical Pharaohs with the charge of atheism. “Pharaoh is one of Philo’s most important figures of the ‘godless’ or ‘atheist,’ defined by the term ἄθεος. In the Allegorical Commentary and QGE, Pharaoh is constructed as ἄθεος or associated with ‘atheism’—ἀθεότης—more than any other biblical figure” (Pearce, *The Land of the Body*, 153).

⁸⁷ I noted above (Chapter Two) that the Hebrew term for bricks, *בִּנְיָה*, is rare in the Hebrew Bible. It occurs mainly in the narrative of Babel and with regard to the Egyptian oppression of Israel.

earthly and passion-driven must first be in place. Granted these conditions, it is only a small matter for Philo to see the Babelite's desire to build with bricks as being on the same plain with the machinations of the Egyptians. Philo further explains the importance of the allegorical bricks with reference to *real bricks* and their mode of production.

This is natural, for when the workman has taken the two substances of earth and water, one solid and the other liquid, but both in the process of dissolution or destruction, and by mixing them has produced a third on the boundary line between the two, called clay, he divides it up into portions ... he wishes thus to make them firmer and more manageable since this, he knows, is the easiest way to secure the completion of the building. (Conf. 89)

The Babelites, in other words, are attempting to build something secure on materials which possess no real stability. Not only the bricks, but also their constitutive materials point to the depraved nature of those who cherish building them in Scripture.

There is another theological *topos* which Philo sees present in the reference to bricks: the enslavement of the better to the worse. A co-text from Exod 2:23, presenting the children of Israel making bricks for the King of Egypt, is key.

They (the Egyptians) wished in this way to show that good is the slave of evil and passion stronger than the higher emotions, that prudence and every virtue are subject to folly and all vice, and thus must render obedience to every command of the despotic power. (Conf. 91)

Philo is juxtaposing Gen 11:3 with Exod 2:23 to produce a distinction, a type and anti-type. This juxtaposition is the response to a potential theological problem. Both the Babelites and the children of Israel are depicted by Scripture producing bricks—which Philo has already told us represents stabilizing of the baser, more passion-driven elements of the human soul. Are the Israelites culpable in any way for their involvement? Passion and vice may be strong; even so strong that Israel, the race that “sees God,” may not be able to resist. The human soul, however, is not without choice. The children of Israel, when enslaved, were still capable of “groaning because of their tasks.”

It is but natural that Israel should sorrow and groan because of them; for the one solitary thing which he still treasures as a jewel amidst his sufferings is that he can weep sore for his present state. (Conf. 92)

This is highly praiseworthy according to Philo. The distinction between the Israelites and the Babelites—as types of the souls—is simple. Israel is lachrymose when passion and vice are established while the tower builders

are not capable of weeping under their burdens. They actually seek to make the passions and the vices more secure and are therefore guilty of self-enslavement.

Philo, to this point, has mapped out two ways of relating to the passions and vices—neither of which is particularly desirable. We have an image of surrender to the vices and another of struggling under the burden of the passions. Is there no other way? Philo asks: “What then is the liberty which is sure and stable” (*Conf.* 94)? It is the service of God—through the Mosaic philosophy—which offers liberty from the passions. This service, however, is unlike any other. It is, following a standard etymology of Israel, the ability to see God.⁸⁸

But it is the special mark of those who serve the Existent, that theirs are not the tasks of cupbearers or bakers nor do they mold or fashion material forms like the brick-makers, but in their thoughts ascend the heavenly height, setting before them Moses, the nature beloved of God, to lead them on the way. (*Conf.* 95)

It is a mark of Philo's belief in the linguistic perfection of the Septuagint that the service of Israel to God is also depicted as relating in some sense to bricks. He quotes Exod 24:10 to describe the liberated Israel at the moment of revelation. Philo's ability to locate negative and positive allegorical values for key terms permits him to present the revelation of God to Moses and the elders of Israel as the very inverse of the activity of the builders of Babel. The term *Logos* is present once again.

For they shall behold the place, which in fact is the Word (ὅς δὴ λόγος ἐστὶ), where stands God the never changing ... and what lies under his feet like ‘the work of a brick of sapphire (ἔργον πλίνθου σαπφείπου), like the form (εἶδος) of the firmament of heaven.’ (Exod 24:10 at *Conf.* 96)

Philo continues his allegory of the bricks with attention to how they were produced by the Babelites. A non-allegorical reader would see nothing at all of importance in the claim that the bricks were baked in fire. Philo, however, claims that the reference to the fire

is a symbolical way of saying that they hardened and strengthened their passions and vices by the heat and high pressure of argument, to prevent their ever being demolished by the guards of wisdom. (*Conf.* 101)

⁸⁸ Pearce claims that Philo's “conception of ‘Israel’ as ‘the one who sees God’ reflects Platonism's teaching on the superiority of sight over all the other senses, and belief in a transcendent Being, whose existence is knowable only by the reasoning activity of the mind” (Pearce, *The Land of the Body*, 30).

This particular allegory seems to rely on some real world experience of Philo with regard to rival philosophical schools in the Hellenistic period. The fire which hardens the bricks of the Babelites is the same as the fiery rhetoric which characterizes much of Philo's own philosophical argumentation. Philo returns again here to the problem *that language* can make the false and insecure appear to be stable and true.

He continues by noticing that the "brick became stone to them." Philo's reliance on the Septuagint is of the utmost significance. The Hebrew text, if our modern commentators are to be believed, is communicating a cultural fact to the reader: Israelites build with stone, unlike their eastern neighbors in Mesopotamia who utilized clay to produce bricks. There is no notion of actual physical transformation taking place in the Hebrew text. This is not the case with regard to Philo's reading of the Septuagint. The text itself states: καὶ ἐγένετο αὐτοῖς ἡ πλίνθος εἰς λίθον. The small particle εἰς is the lexical opening—and exegetical foundation—which Philo utilizes to claim that the bricks are actually transformed into a harder and more impregnable substance—stone.⁸⁹

For the looseness and incoherence of the talk which streams along unsupported by reason turns into solid and resisting substance, when it gains density through powerful reasonings and convincing demonstrations.

(Conf. 102)

Scripture is not seeking here to communicate a curious cultural fact about ancient building practices, but to demonstrate what happens when corrupt and corrupting philosophy is not met by truth—it grows in power and forms the foundation for greater transgression. It grows in power through speech itself. All is not lost, however. In a remarkably astute move, Philo seizes on word-order to point to the graciousness of God. While brick may *become* stone, Scripture also claims that "asphalt was clay to them" (καὶ ἄσφαλτος ἦν αὐτοῖς πηλός). (The preposition εἰς is missing in this instance.) In the first segment, a weaker substance becomes harder and more solid. But the opposite is also the case. Philo sees this reversal as a great kindness granted by the divine. The triumph of the passions and vice is only an apparent victory.

The wicked may seem to make the weak cause strong against the better, and to harden the loose stuff which exudes from the weak, to obtain a firm footing

⁸⁹ For a general discussion of the preposition εἰς see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 369–371.

from which to shoot their bolts against virtue. But the Father of excellence in his loving-kindness will not suffer the platform to reach the condition of cement which defies dissolution, but makes the unsubstantial result of their fluid industry to be but sloppy clay. (*Conf.* 104)

Of hermeneutical significance is the manner in which Philo deploys word-order to bolster a larger theological point he is making about the graciousness of God with regard to the human condition. Human beings, despite their enslavement to vice and the passions, are never totally lost because the divine will not permit such a situation to pertain indefinitely. Philo nicely completes his discussion of Gen 11:3 with a larger point about what is actually stable and secure: Mosaic philosophy. In fact, cleaving to the words of Scripture, Philo underscores Moses' disaffiliation with the very substance used by the Babelites—*ἄσφαλτος*. He brings forward two co-texts to demonstrate that the Wise always disassociate themselves from such a substance. Genesis 6:14 shows Noah entering into an ark (allegorically the body) covered with *ἄσφαλτος* when he is confronted by the flood of passions and vice. Following the deluge, however, Noah emerges from the asphalt-covered ark of the body, and sees truth clearly and plainly. Moses, in contrast, is *never* content to be associated with the substance. Philo notes that the infant liberator "weeps bitterly (Exod 2:6) in the days when he is imprisoned in the ark of the body bedaubed with asphalt-pitch" (*ἄσφαλτοπίσση*) (Exod 2:3 at *Conf.* 106). The exegesis of Gen 11:3 closes, however, with a reference to the true stability of stone itself. "All that is fixed and permanent in circumstances and conditions is graven as on stone in the keeping of God alone" (*Conf.* 106). Graven as on stone is a clear reference to the stability of Mosaic Law, engraved upon the Tablets of the Law. Perhaps, in addition, some memory of the Babelites engaging in foreign building practice is retained: Brick and Asphalt are never to be preferred over Stone, even if the substances are all understood allegorically.

4.4. *An Edifice of Unedifying Doctrines*⁹⁰ (Gen 11:4 and *Conf.* 107–133)

Philo has already communicated a great deal about the motivation of the Babelites—through their location on the plain of Shinar and even their very choice of building materials—by the time he turns his attention to the biblical text's explicit motivation for the tower builders' actions. There are four elements of Philo's reading of Gen 11:4 which require our attention:

⁹⁰ The title for this section is taken from Philo's discussion of the Tower of Babel in *On Dreams* 2:285.

the concept of the city, the meaning of the tower “with its head in the heavens,” the fear of dispersion, and the term *tower* itself. Each of these elements, unsurprisingly, highlights the corruption and depravity of the Babelites-as-human-soul.

We saw above that the Hebrew Bible presents a somewhat mixed or ambivalent understanding of the nature of the city. Philo’s allegorical approach does not entirely resolve the ambiguity, but does place it within a larger interpretive framework. David Runia has explored Philo’s ambivalent understanding of the concept of the ‘city’ in some detail and asserts that

though as an Alexandrian Philo was very much a *homo urbanus*, he nevertheless reveals a significant ambivalence towards the city. This attitude is related to his dual ideological background (Jewish and Greek).⁹¹

With regard to Gen 11, Philo emphasizes the negative estimation of the city in the Hebrew Bible and, once again, translates this evaluation to the inner-workings of the human soul. O’Leary cautions, however, that “(Philo) does not dissolve the idea of the city into a merely spiritual affair.”⁹² The allegorical reading of ‘city’ remains in significant dialogue (perhaps even tension) with the genuine article experienced daily by the philosopher.

The law-giver thinks that besides those cities which are built by men’s hands upon the earth, of which the materials are stone and timber, there are others, even those which men carry about established in their souls. Naturally, these are models or archetypes, for the workmanship bestowed upon them is of a more divine kind. (Conf. 107)

The complexities and inner-relationships of the human soul are here imagined metaphorically as a Greek *polis*. This is quite a useful metaphor for Philo, as it allows him to focus on the proper relationship between the various parts of the tripartite human soul. Just as with actual cities, some are governed well while others suffer the fate of mismanagement, so too it is with the soul. “Of the soul-city there are two kinds, one better the other worse” (Conf. 108). The question, then, is the correct understanding of the Babelites desire for the founding of a city. Philo again constructs a fairly rigid dichotomy. In the process, he (like his contemporary Josephus) is in significant dialogue with larger Greco-Roman political theory. The better soul, according to Philo, is marked by

⁹¹ David T. Runia, “The Idea and Reality of the City in the Thought of Philo of Alexandria,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61 (2000): 361.

⁹² O’Leary, “*Logos* and *Koinônia*,” 265.

democracy ... which honors equality and has law and justice for its rulers. The soul-city which is corrupt—the type represented by the Babelites—is under the control of mob-rule (ὄχλοκρατία), which takes inequality for its ideal, and in it injustice and lawlessness are paramount.⁹³ (Conf. 108)

The unity of intention that was praised as a positive benefit for humanity by Philo's imagined interlocutors at the beginning of the treatise is hereby answered (Conf. 13). The unity of Babel is translated as the unity of the mob.

Runia, in line with O'Leary, suggests that the line between allegory and politics is stretched with regard to Philo's relationship to the concept 'city.' He posits that the ambivalent attitude which Philo holds with regard to the city may be explained by recourse to his own personal history in Alexandria; a city only second in power in the ancient world to Rome. We must be careful, however, in negotiating the space between actual cities like Alexandria populated by Jews, Greeks, and Egyptians and the hermeneutical city which serves as an archetype for Philo's reading of Babel. Philo may certainly be placing the narrative of Babel into conversation with the political and civic realities of his day, but, unlike Josephus, the application of any lesson from Babel in Philo seems to be far more universalized. The particularity of Israel and its nature, in this instance, is a possibility to which all rational and virtue loving souls can aspire—regardless of their political affiliation.

The distinction between good and bad cities (souls) is personalized in Philo, not through the figure of Nimrod (as in Josephus), but through the character (in both senses) of Cain—the original city-builder of Scripture. The Babelites are—in a most literal sense—the posterity of Cain. They are linked genealogically by Philo to Cain who is representative of that “depravity which is ever dying and is never dead” (Conf. 122). In order to appreciate fully the damning connection of the tower builders to Cain, it is necessary to grasp Philo's larger understanding of Cain and the human nature he signifies in Mosaic philosophy. What is a potential connection in the Hebrew Bible between Cain and the Babelites is made explicit in Philo's

⁹³ The term ὄχλοκρατία is of significance. Philo elsewhere refers to it as the “worst of evil polities” (*Opif.* 171 and *Virt.* 180). It is “associated with polytheism and with the revolt of chaos against the shaping hand of the Creator; it is contrasted not only with *dēmokratia* (also at *Agr.* 45; *Virt.* 180) but with legitimate monarchy ... clearly *dēmokratia* and (divine) sovereignty go together in Philo's outlook” (O'Leary, “*Logos* and *Koinônia*,” 265). For a full discussion of the political outlook of Philo, see Ray Barraclough, “Philo's Politics: Roman Rule and Hellenistic Judaism,” *ANRW* II: 21.1 (1983): 417–553.

reading. Scripture's designation of Cain as the builder of the first city is treated ontologically by Philo, who points to the absurdity of taking the text literally. He presumes that Cain, when he begins building his city, is all alone in the world. He would have no need, and would be unable to construct, a city. Rather, "it is better to take the words figuratively, as meaning that Cain resolves to set up his own creed, just as one might set up a city" (*Posterity*, 51). The city as a concept is therefore linked to the character of Cain. In his treatise *On the Posterity and Exile of Cain*, Philo discusses the nature of the city built by Cain.

Every city needs for its existence buildings, inhabitants and laws. Cain's buildings are demonstrable arguments ... his inhabitants are the wise in their own conceit ... his law are various forms of lawlessness and injustice.

(*Posterity*, 52)

The above quote points to one of the key elements of Philo's allegorical presentation of those cities which are built on the model of Cain—they represent the argumentation and sophistry of those who hold to a faulty and destructive philosophy. Along these lines, Philo cites a single intertext to make his larger point. Gen 4:7 describes that first city built by Cain and records that he gave the appellation of his son, Enoch, to that city. Philo deploys an etymological tradition to define Enoch (Ἐνὼχ) as "thy gift" (ὁ γὰρ Ἐνὼχ ἐρμηνεύεται χάρις σου) (*Conf.* 103). Grabbe explains the significance of the etymology with reference to the Hebrew term יְנֹחַ. "Your favor" of "your gift" is thus the meaning.⁹⁴ Philo faces a problem with this etymology, however, because there are two characters in Genesis who bear this name. In one case, with regard to the Enoch who is taken by God, the interpretation of the name is positive (see *Abr.* 17). In the present case, however, its connection with Cain delivers a negative reading. The passage in *Confusion* is a bit elliptical. Philo seems to assume that the etymology and its importance are understood by his readers. Philo is more explicit in *Posterity* when he states that Enoch represents the view that "man is the measure of all things, all things are present and a gift of the mind" (*Posterity*, 36).

The significance of this etymology for Philo is the equation of those who build cities with a conviction that the senses may be trusted to communicate truth. This is a faulty and destructive epistemology. Only corrupting philosophy can rise from such a foundation.

⁹⁴ Grabbe, *Etymology in Early Jewish Interpretation*, 156–157.

... each of the unholy ones thinks that his understanding gives him his apprehension and reflections, that his eyes give him sight, his ears hearing, his nostrils smell, and the other senses the functions that belong to them severally, and again that the vocal organs give him speech, but God, he thinks, is either not the cause in any sense, or not the first cause. (*Conf.* 125)

The underlying question is clearly epistemological: what sources can be trusted to provide true counsel? “The impious man (ἄσεβει) thinks that the mind has sovereign power (αὐτοκράτορα) over what it plans, and sense over what it perceives” (*Conf.* 125). Cain—and those of his line—trust their own senses and hold that their own counsel is true.

The people are not content, however, to build only a city. They also wish to construct a tower. For Philo, this tower serves at least two functions. First, it is to be a citadel—a fortification and stronghold for “the despot vice.” The tower, thus, serves the psychological-political function of the corrupt city: it strengthens vice (characterized here as a despot or tyrant). The tower is an intensification of the negative allegorical evaluation of the city. There is another level of signification, however. The phrase “with its head in the heavens” is taken by Philo to be an indicator of the nature of the Babelites’ corruption. Whereas a literal reading of the passage (both ancient and modern) tends to focus on the phrase as a marker for its incredible height, the allegorical understanding of Philo is more concerned with the term “heavens” as a subject for philosophical debate. The phrase “head in the heavens” is not about the hubris of height, the desire to build a structure that touches the heavens, but about inappropriate and blasphemous theological debate. (Philo has much in connection here with another Alexandrian Jewish thinker, the author of *3 Baruch*.)

The tower not only has human misdeeds for its base, but it seeks to rise to the region of celestial things, with the arguments of impiety and godlessness in its van. Such are its pronouncements, either that the Deity does not exist, or that it exists but does not exert providence, or that the world had no beginning in which it was created, or though that created its course is under the sway of varying and random causation. (*Conf.* 114)

Philo is not simply charging the people here with theoretical atheism—a conviction that the deity does not exist at all—but, rather, with a functional atheism which ignores the limits of human ability and gives no credit to the sovereignty of the deity or his just management of the cosmos. For Philo, this is the worst of all possible sins. Pearce has pointed to the unique position that language associated with atheism plays in Philo’s writings.

Philo is one of the most important ancient sources for the vocabulary of atheism ... he is also the first Jewish writer to speak extensively in these terms,

and perhaps the first to use the vocabulary of atheism at all. Its special place in his thinking is indicated by the superlatively negative value to which Philo attributes atheism as the source of all wrongs.⁹⁵

The philosophical beliefs attributed to the tower builders are not only the inner-musings of the corrupt soul—they also play out on the stage of ancient philosophy and politics. Philo makes a similar argument concerning the phrase “head in the heavens” in another treatise. In *On Dreams*, Philo’s discussion of Babel is part of a larger polemic concerning correct and incorrect forms of speech. The Babelites, of course, are the representatives of an exceedingly virulent form of negative speech; a form which is very similar to the philosophical views in the quote above. The Babelites are characterized as

those who extended their activities of their word-cleverness to heaven itself ... They declared that nothing exists beyond this world of our sight and senses, that it neither was created nor will perish, but is uncreated, imperishable, without guardian, helmsman or protector. (*Dreams* 2:283)

The Babelites are presented as the primordial and universal representatives of an atheism that “is always associated with the failure to recognize God.”⁹⁶ Philo’s charges are somewhat broad, as P. Borgen has noted.

With regard to this somewhat sketchy reference to philosophical ideas, Philo would in his criticism have in mind the denial of providence by the Sceptics and the Epicureans and the uncertainty expressed by the Sceptics as to the existence of the gods.⁹⁷

In addition to the philosophical debate presumed, Borgen reads this description of the builders of the tower in light of a particular political and religious crisis within the history of Judaism during the Roman period—the advent of Gaius Caligula. Caligula, a notorious self-deifier, is described in the following words:

he no longer considered it worthy of him to abide within the bounds of human nature but overstepped (put one’s head over: ὑπερέκλυπτε) them in his eagerness to be thought a god.⁹⁸ (*Embassy* 75)

Later on, Caligula is described as:

⁹⁵ Pearce, *Land of the Body*, 153–154.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁹⁷ Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria*, 195.

⁹⁸ Translation modified by Borgen from LCL.

A despot who is young and judges that whatever he wishes is beneficial and that what he has once decreed is as good as accomplished ... For having soared above man, he is already enrolling (γράφει) himself among gods.

(*Embassy* 218)

Borgen argues that this description of Caligula, particularly the claim that the emperor is enrolling himself among gods, “has much in common with Philo’s interpretation of the tower builders in *Somm* 2 [*Dreams*].”⁹⁹ The builders of Babel in *On Dreams* are described thusly: “they hoped to soar up to heaven in the realm of thoughts for the overthrow of the eternal kingship ... they enroll (ἀναγράφουσι) themselves as rulers and kings” (*Dreams* 2:285, 290). If Borgen’s reading of Philo is correct, we have here an excellent example of an author allegorically utilizing a cultural classic to critique a specific aspect of Roman culture—the deification of the emperor. The problem faced by such a reading is the dating of an individual Philonic treatise. In addition, while the connection that Borgen makes between the Babelites and Caligula is certainly plausible, Philo does not appear to be talking politics in *Confusion*. The target of his ire appears much more diffuse. The allegory of the soul, almost by definition, diminishes any political reading of the treatise.

Philo is at his most literal in his discussion of the phrase “let us make a name for ourselves.” Given his already negative estimation of the Babelites’ dispositions and the meaning of their building project, Philo reads the desire to make a name, not just as another motivation, but as a further commentary on the total depravity of the people and their commitment to vice.

What monstrous and extravagant shamelessness! What is this you say? You ought to be hiding your misdeeds in night and profound darkness, and to have taken, if not true shame, at least the simulation to veil them. (*Conf.* 116)

The people (and therefore the corrupted human soul) are not only guilty, but they make no attempt to disguise their guilt. Philo, having vented his anger against these unrepentant sinners—next enquires into what type of name the people are seeking. Here is more diatribe, however, as Philo presents what amounts to a vice-list. The name that the people seek includes “recklessness with shamelessness, insolence with violence, violence with murder, seductions with adultery” (*Conf.* 117)—to name only a few from the Philonic list.

⁹⁹ Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria*, 197. He refers here to *On Dreams*.

Philo finds it difficult to believe that the unrepentant can be entirely ignorant of the punishment that awaits them. “Perhaps they have not merely a presentiment, but a clear foresight of their own destruction. For they say ‘before we are dispersed’” (*Conf.* 119). Philo is asserting here a basic theological point: human vice is never done with a completely clean conscience. The underlying implication is that God punishes only for known, flagrant transgressions. Philo makes this theological assertion by way of an exegetical point, however. The Babelites of the Septuagint claim that they desire to make name *before* they are dispersed (πρὶν διασπαρῆναι). The phrasing suggests that the builders had some knowledge that their plans would ultimately fail. The Hebrew text, as we saw above, would have caused some problems for Philo’s interpretation. The difference for interpretation is profound—the desire to make a name in the Hebrew is connected somehow with an attempt to avoid dispersion while in Philo’s Greek translation the desire for a name points further to the people’s degradation. The builders are aware of the judgment that is coming upon them. Knowledge that judgment is a just consequence founded in the very nature of God is the central theological tenant that Philo is here expounding. The people’s premonition that they will indeed be scattered eventually for their sins is Scriptural proof for Philo that God has made known to the created order something about the nature of justice and righteousness.

The punishments of God’s visitation may be thought to be hidden from our sight, but they are really well known. For all, however wicked, receive some general notion to the effect that their iniquity will not pass unseen by God, and that they cannot altogether evade the necessity of being brought to judgment. (*Conf.* 120)

There is much in common here with Philo’s previous discussion about the phrase “head in the heavens.” While he describes the Babelites as followers of a rival philosophy which looks to the senses and the human mind as the measure for all things, the biblical text subtly subverts the very possibility of truly and honestly holding such a view: even this most wicked of generations, the tower builders, heirs of Cain and forerunners of Pharaoh, can not escape some notion of the punishment which awaits them in God’s justice. It is not a stretch to suggest that Philo seeks to exonerate the divine by demonstrating that the Babelites themselves were aware of their transgressions. The God of Israel is acting in a consistent ethical fashion which is clearly apprehensible to all. The irony is that Philo presents the tower builders as holding to a philosophical system which has no place for such consistent divine justice and governance. In one breath the Babelites boldly proclaim that “the Deity does not exist, or that it exists but does not exert

providence,” while in the next they confess that they know they will be punished for their crimes and that they should build a city and a tower “before we are dispersed.” In the final analysis, however, Philo seems intent (both here and elsewhere) in suggesting that it is an impossibility to ever become totally deaf to the divine will; sin-sick souls can simply never become so disordered that the conscience fails to

prick them in spite of their exceeding godlessness ... thus drawing them on reluctantly to assent to the truth that all human doings are surveyed by a superior being and that there awaits an incorruptible avenger. (*Conf.* 121)

He views such an inherent ability of the part of humans as an ultimate act of kindness on the part of the divine.

Philo concludes his discussion of Gen 11:4 with one additional allegorical reading which is somewhat disconnected from the material surrounding it. In this allegory, Philo returns to a discussion of the meaning of ‘tower’ itself. In this allegorical constellation, the tower is taken to represent the human senses themselves while the heavens are imagined as the mind. In a sense, we have here a brief reiteration of the larger philosophical argument that has permeated Philo’s reading of this particular verse: the correct philosophical disposition (and therefore approach to life) is dependent upon a proper relationship between the parts of the soul; in this case, the legitimate and limited role of the senses. The raising of the tower towards the heavens is, therefore, the elevation of the senses.

Many too have exalted their senses, as though they were a tower, so that they touch the boundaries of heaven, that is symbolically our mind, wherein range and dwell those divine forms of being with excel all others. (*Conf.* 133)

Philo draws a co-text here from another passage which deals with the destruction of a tower. Judges 8:9 narrates a threat uttered by Gideon to demolish the tower of Penuel. “Gideon swore, we read, to the men of Penuel saying, ‘When I return with peace, I will demolish this tower’” (Jud 8:9 at *Conf.* 130). Philo expounds on the title Penuel (φανουήλ)—interpreted as “turning from God”—to give the generic term tower greater specificity and more immediate interpretive application.¹⁰⁰ Scriptural towers are constructed to lead others to turn away from the divine and to rely on lesser forms of knowledge. Gideon is a type of Justice who “receives the strength to pull down every argument (πάντα λόγον) which would persuade the mind

¹⁰⁰ Grabbe, *Etymology in Early Jewish Interpretation*, 211. The etymology provided by Philo is possible based on Hebrew grammar, although the more common interpretation is “face of God” based on the account of Jacob at the Jabbok in Gen 32:31.

to turn away from holiness" (ἀποσρέφειν διάνοιαν ὁσιότητος) (*Conf.* 131). The tower is actually the turning-upside-down of the natural order of things—the inversion of the correct place of senses and the perceptible world as subordinate to the world of the mind and ideas. It is ultimate abandonment of the divine. Philo demonstrates this philosophical truth, once again, by means of the language of Scripture.

4.5. *Justice and the God of Babel* (*Gen 11:5–6* and *Conf.* 134–168)

In this section of his treatise Philo is occupied with refuting inappropriate notions of divinity, explaining the Hebrew Bible's choice of terminology and demonstrating the importance of grammar for a proper apprehension of divine justice.

Initially, Philo's attention is drawn to the issue of divine transcendence by the biblical claim that "the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built." Philo is at his most blunt: the phrase "must certainly be understood in a figurative sense" (τροπικώτερον πάντως ἀκουστέον) (*Conf.* 134). There are two elements of the passage which offend Philo's theological-philosophical sensibilities. First, as a Platonist, the notion of divine movement is problematic. God's movement from one place to another implies that the claim "God fills all things" is false. Philo launches into a rather lengthy discussion on the impossibility of God moving or changing location because of his omnipresence. Philo borders here on a sort of pan-theism: "He has made his powers extend through earth and water, air and heaven, and left no part of the universe without his presence" (*Conf.* 136). Why then does Moses ascribe movement to the deity? Philo detects a pedagogical function present as "the lawgiver is applying human terms to the superhuman God, to help us, his pupils, learn our lesson" (ταῦτα δὲ ἀνθρωπολογεῖται παρὰ τῷ νομοθέτῃ περὶ τοῦ μὴ ἀνθρωπομόρφου θεοῦ διὰ τὰς τῶν παιδευμένων ἡμῶν) (*Conf.* 135). An equally troublesome implication of the biblical text is that God needed to descend in order *to see* what the people were doing; divine omniscience, no less than omnipresence, is thereby called into question by the biblical text. Moses, Philo assures us, is speaking in such a manner only

to admonish and instruct us, that the absent who are at a long distance from the facts, should never form conclusions hastily or rely on precarious conjectures, but should come to close quarters with things, inspect them one by one and carefully envisage them. (*Conf.* 134)

The dangerous implication that God needed to descend in order to inspect the work of the people is neutralized by recourse to a hermeneutical *imitatio*

Dei. If even the deity is presented as engaged in observation before action, so too should be the wise-minded. Furthermore, the biblical image of the deity is softened by presenting the deity as concerned with the justness of the legal processes of punishment. The God of Israel, far from irrationally punishing the tower builders for what might appear capricious reasons (*Conf.* 9–14), is, in actuality, a righteous Judge who *models* just behavior for humanity.

The next exegetical site of activity is the biblical description of the Babelites as the “sons of men.” Philo posits another fictitious literal-minded hermeneutical interlocutor with whom he can argue: “A novel piece of information,” states the imagined ‘profane person’, “the law giver here imparts to us, namely that it is the sons of men and not some other beings who build cities and towers” (*Conf.* 142).¹⁰¹ Philo’s response, once again, involves the drawing of a distinction—the creation of a dichotomy. The phrase “sons of men” is not an “obvious and hackneyed fact.” There is a “hidden truth which can be traced under the surface meaning of the words” (ὅπερ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἱχνηλατεῖται διὰ τῶν ἐμφανῶν ὀνομάτων) (*Conf.* 143). Scripture states that the builders were the sons of *men* to inform us that they were not the sons of *God*. The former are characterized by an inferior philosophy. Philo is making the same ideological point as above with reference to the tower with its head in the heavens, but using a different exegetical vehicle. The sons of men are those who

ascribe to existing things a multitude of fathers as it were and by introducing their miscellany of deities have flooded everything with ignorance and confusion, or have assigned pleasure the function of being the aim and the end of the soul. (*Conf.* 144)

In this description, Philo equates polytheism with hedonism and sees both as being the property of those whom Scripture calls the sons of men. Moses is not communicating some obvious and unimportant fact concerning the builders of the city and tower, but is pointing (again) to their very nature. But the “sons of men” are one side of a coin. The group is contrasted with those whom Moses denotes “sons of God” (drawing on Deut 4:1; 32:18). In contrast to the Babelites and their desire for pleasure, the sons of God hold “moral beauty to be the only good” (*Conf.* 145). These sons of God are also described as “Israel—the ones who see God.” The hermeneutical principle is clear: Scripture, for Philo, makes no statement without theological intent.

¹⁰¹ A similar tradition is found in *Genesis Rabbah*. See Chapter Eight, below.

Grammar, as has already been seen, can be the foundation for allegorical argumentation. The biblical narrative continues with the divine assessment of the people in Gen 11:6, broken up into two separate units by Philo. The first segment on which he comments is the observation: “behold there is one race and one lip of them all” (ἰδοὺ γένος ἓν καὶ χεῖλος ἓν πάντων) (*Conf.* 150). Philo passes quickly over the phrase by offering the same basic interpretation given at the outset of the treatise in connection with Gen 11:1. The second unit continues, “(and this) they have begun to do” (καὶ τοῦτο ἤρξαντο ποιῆσαν). The *incomplete nature* of the Babelites’ undertakings (they have begun to do) will be examined in two separate ways by Philo. He will first make a distinction between the wrong the Babelites committed against one another and that which they attempted to commit against the divine. The people had limited success with regard to the later.

For while in wronging each other they achieved much of what they wished and their deeds confirmed what their senseless scheming had devised, it was not so with their impiety. For the things that are God’s cannot be harmed or injured, and when these reprobates turn their transgressions against them, they attain but to the beginning and never arrive at the end (οἱ δυσκάθαρτοι τὰς ἀρχὰς εὗρισκονται μόνον, πρὸς δὲ τὸ τέλος φθάνουσιν οὐδέποτε).¹⁰²

(*Conf.* 153)

That the Babelites were unable to assault the divine is ‘proven’ exegetically by the divine claim that the city and the tower were only the *beginning* (ἤρξαντο ποιῆσαι) of the people’s activities. A literal reading of the passage would suggest that the deity is apprehensive of other, unnamed, deeds the people might attempt. Such a reading is unacceptable for Philo. Fear is not a property appropriate to the God of Israel. He solves this problem by misreading the Scriptural statement as a focus not on *future* actions of the tower builders but of the ultimately *incomplete* actions of the Babelites.

There is one other problem to which Philo must attend. The biblical text presents a paradox in that the people are only at the beginning of their project, while, at the same time, it also claims that God descended to see the city and the tower which the people had built (ᾠκοδόμησαν). Tense is taken quite literally here as Philo points out: οὐχ ὅν οἰκοδομῆσαι μέλλουσιν, ἀλλ’ ὅν ᾠκοδόμησαν ἤδη (*Conf.* 155).¹⁰³ How can Scripture assert that the Babelites

¹⁰² Philo suggests, but provides no evidence, that he is aware of a tradition that the Babelites engaged in oppression of one another. He does not develop the idea allegorical, at any rate.

¹⁰³ For a discussion of this particular hermeneutical move and its comparison with rabbinic exegesis, see Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria*, 155.

“had built” a city and a tower and elsewhere say that they had “only begun” to do such things? How can completion and limitation be held together? The paradox is resolved for Philo by recourse to a parallel drawn from the Mosaic Law and its application. The fact that the people were not able to assault the divine realm does not excuse their actions—they should be punished as though they had actually been successful.

That they only began and were unable to reach the end of their impiety is no reason why they should not be denounced as they would had they carried out their intentions. Therefore, he speaks of their having completed the tower, though they had not done so. (Conf. 155)

Philo appears at his most literal in his discussion of the incompleteness of the tower, physically understood. Philo relies, first, on ancient astronomy to ‘prove’ the absurdity of the thought that the builders could have truly completed the tower, thereby requiring his allegorical reading of the assertion that God descended to see the tower that had been built! The tower builders would have eventually come in contact with “aether, that holy fire ... if this is so, then men who ventured on the ascent could not fail to be blasted and consumed by the fire” (Conf. 157).¹⁰⁴ The tower would have been burnt up. Philo thus provides a *scientific rationale* for the biblical claim that the Babelites had not completed their tower building. This leaves him with the need to explain the language of Scripture where, according to the divine, the Babelites “had built” a city and a tower.

He is aided in his dismissal of the divine past-tense by another Scriptural phrase: the people “ceased” (ἐπαύσαντο) their building project with the descent of the deity. Certainly, one does not cease something that is already completed. Even so, the culpability of the crime was no less than had the people consummated their plans entirely. There is an echo of apologetics in place as Philo describes why the deity is justified in punishing the Babelites if they had not consummated their assault on the heavens. Philo demonstrates the legality of such an approach by reference to Exod 21:14. The biblical passage reads:

Ἐὰν τις ἐπιθῇται τῷ πλησίον ἀποκτείνει αὐτὸν δόλῳ καὶ
καταφύγῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου λήψῃ αὐτὸν θανατῶσαι

When a man schemes against another and kills him treacherously,
You shall take him from my very altar to be put to death.

¹⁰⁴ It is here that Philo adopts a view that he has attributed to critics of the literal meaning of the Mosaic Law in Conf. 5.

The legal point which Philo derives from this passage is simple: intent to commit a crime is equal to the commission of the crime. Philo splices what the biblical text presents as one act, homicide, into two distinct movements. The passage speaks of both attacking (ἐπιθῆται) and killing (ἀποκτείνει). This distinction allows Philo to argue:

and yet he merely attacks him and has not killed him, but the law regards the purpose of the murder as a crime equal to the murder itself, and so, even though he takes sanctuary, it does not grant him the privileges of sanctuary.
(*Conf.* 160)

Philo is inferring a hidden juridical principle. The purpose of the laws of asylum was precisely to allow a person who was guilty of taking a human life to have sanctuary against reprisal. The biblical text claims that a person who commits a crime with malice aforethought is not permitted to take sanctuary. The distinguishing mark between the two acts is premeditation. The Babelites, according to such legal logic, were certainly guilty of premeditation. But Philo goes beyond the meaning of the biblical text by claiming that premeditation *alone is sufficient* for punishment. By referencing this passage from Exodus, Philo is able to explain why, even though the people clearly did not complete the building of the tower and the assault on the heavens, God was justified in punishing the people as though they had actually done so.¹⁰⁵ Scripture speaks of the incomplete activity of the builders to highlight the impossibility of their intentions and in the past-tense to underscore their culpability for plotting such actions.

Philo is not finished working with this passage, however. Allegorically, the phrase “flee to refuge” also signifies an attack against the divine. In a flagrant misprision of the underlying rationale for biblical asylum laws, Philo suggests that when a murderer seeks asylum at the altar of God the criminal is seeking to attribute his evil deeds to the divine.

The words ‘flee to refuge’ lead us to the reflection that there are many who, wishing to shirk all charges to which they are liable and claiming to escape the penalties of their misdeeds, ascribe the guilty responsibility, which really belongs to them, to God who is the cause of nothing evil.
(*Conf.* 161)

¹⁰⁵ The choice of Exod 21:14 as a co-text in this setting might appear odd. Why apply this legal principle from the Torah to the builders of Babel? One suggestion might be that the text under discussion uses a key term from Babel in both its Greek and Hebrew iterations. The individual who pursues and kill another is guilty of a crime against “his neighbor” (in Hebrew, רֵעֵהוּ and in Greek, πλησίος). Neither of these terms, however, is particularly rare. Philo has utilized other common key terms, however, to draw connections between Babel and other biblical figures and narratives.

While Philo is here discussing a verse dealing with the punishment of one guilty of murder (or attempted murder), the choice of co-text is not without its own interpretive power. The affront of the Babelites is compared, at least hermeneutically, to murder.

The punishment of the tower builders is the topic next addressed by Philo. In contrast to modern commentators who see the confusion of language and the dispersal of the people as the punishment for the crime of the Babelites, Philo locates the true punishment elsewhere, by translating what most expositors take as an observation into the passing of divine judgment: “nothing shall fail from them of all that they attempt to do” (καὶ νῦν οὐκ ἐκλείψει ἐξ αὐτῶν πάντα ὅσα ἂν ἐπιθῶνται ποιεῖν). This phrase is read as the divine removal of all limitations of the potential evil of the human soul. Just as Philo above described the flood as a “letting loose of sins, a rushing torrent of iniquity where there was naught to hinder (*Conf.* 25)”, here too, Philo envisages a God who gives up on the moral possibilities of his creations.

What a misery, transcending limitation and measurement, that everything that the mind in its utter infatuation attempts should be its obedient vassal not backward in any service whether great or small, but hastening as it were to anticipate its every need. (*Conf.* 163)

It should be clear that we have returned to the realm of allegory in Philo’s reading of the tower. The focus has shifted back to the individual human soul and its moral education and discipline. In fact, Philo’s understanding of the soul is made most clear following his discussion of the punishment of the Babelites.

For it is a terrible thing that the soul, so wild as it is by nature, should be suffered to go unbridled, when even under the rein and with the whip in full play it can hardly be controlled and made docile. (*Conf.* 166)

God’s punishment of the Babelites is, in reality, a most gracious and life-giving act.

4.6. *Break Up the Company of Vice* (*Gen* 11:7–9 and *Conf.* 168–200)

The language of Scripture remains central to Philo’s reading of the conclusion of the Babel narrative. He explores the singular nature of deity and its separation from materiality, the significance of *confusion* as an appellation for the sin of Shinar, and the precise nature of the punishment of the Babelites.

Philo must first stop to assert the absolute singularity of the divine. Such an apologetic is made necessary by the use of the divine plural in *Gen* 11:7. To whom is God speaking when he seeks to descend and confuse the language

of the people? Philo simply asserts that “no existing thing is of equal value to God and that there is only one sovereign and ruler and king” (*Conf.* 170). What is most curious is that Philo provides a proof text, not from the Torah, but from the *Iliad*. The poet states: “It is not well that many lords should rule; be there but one, one king.”¹⁰⁶ Philo claims that, the original context notwithstanding, the words “could be said with more justice of the world and of God than of cities and men” (*Conf.* 170). Philo draws on the culturally superior voice of Homer and engages in a common rhetorical move—the *a minori ad maius* argument. If the poet Homer could make such a claim with regard to human governance, such would surely be the case with regard to divine governance. Polytheism is, therefore, a violation of the best of Hellenistic wisdom.

Having established (or at least asserted) the singular nature of God, Philo moves on to explain what is meant by Scripture’s usage of the divine plural; to whom is God speaking when he says “let us go down and confuse their language?” Philo’s theology has a place for lesser (created) divine beings who work on behalf of God. In the present context, Philo calls these beings “potencies” (δυναμεις). “God is one, but He has all around Him numberless potencies, which all assist and protect created being” (*Conf.* 171). O’Leary suggests that “perhaps a contrast is suggested between this collaboration between God and his *synergoi* and the wicked collaboration of the builders of Babel.”¹⁰⁷ Philo—like his philosophical forebears—is attempting to negotiate a transcendent notion of deity against a desire for divine immanence. In *On the Special Laws*, Philo states that:

it was not allowed that the boundless and disordered matter should come into contact with the blessed and happy one; instead he used the invisible Powers, whose real name is the Forms, to enable each kind to take its appropriate shape. (*Spec. Laws* 1:329)

It is, therefore, the lesser (created) powers or potencies which interact with humanity on God’s behalf. These ‘Powers’, claims O’Leary:

Have a personal quality, whether as an expression of the loving divine will or in a quasi-angelic autonomy. The Powers cushion God against direct involvement with less worthy aspects of his creation (*Abr* 143; *Fug* 68–74; *Opif* 72–75). In Philo’s eyes this does not entail any indifference or remoteness, but is a refinement in the order of providence.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ *Iliad*, 2:204–205.

¹⁰⁷ O’Leary, “*Logos and Konônia*,” 268.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 248.

This is a general theological principle which Philo will put to exegetical use. One such power is “chastisement” (κόλασις). While chastisement might seem to be a negative power, it is not necessarily so. It is, rather, a “preventative and correction of sin” (*Conf.* 171). The reference to corrective to sin mirrors and answers the questions raised by the imaginary interlocutors at the beginning of Philo’s treatise. There, the narrative of Babel is maligned as illogical because if the punishment was brought about as a corrective for human sin, it was clearly a failure. Here, Philo demonstrates that, allegorically understood, the punishment was actually intended to halt the degeneration of the soul. What human beings experience as divine judgment, according to Philo, is very often divine kindness.

After further discussion of the Potencies (and how some have deified them) Philo explains—with reference to human kings—that the divine consultation with these Power does not imply any diminution of divine power.

The king may fitly hold converse with his powers and employ them to serve in matters which should be consummated by God alone. It is true that the Father of All has no need of aught. (*Conf.* 175)

At one level, Philo is simply trying to explain the Scriptural use of divine plurals—both with regard to the punishment of the Babelites and the creation of human beings. God’s use of lieutenants serves a much more important theological purpose, however. It absolves God from any connection with evil or punishment. So, for example, Philo claims that human beings are the only creatures that are capable of knowing right and wrong, good and evil, and consciously choosing the wrong.

Thus it was meet and right that when man was formed, God should assign a share in the work to his lieutenants ... so that man’s right actions might be attributable to God, but his sins to others. (*Conf.* 179)

This might appear to be a rather large theological digression, but it serves as important background to understanding the Power of Chastisement and its presence in the Babel narrative. Philonic discomfort with God’s connection to the creation of sin is akin to Philo’s discomfort with the possibility that God himself could actually be a source of punishment. Punishment is conceived of as a potential source of contamination.

God is the source of good things only, and of nothing at all that is bad, since He himself was the most ancient of beings and the good in its most perfect form. (*Conf.* 180)

According to this theological tenant, God *needed* to rely on one of his δυνάμεις—that of Chastisement—in order to punish the Babelites. The

theological point of such a division between God and his Potencies is the protection of the very nature of God. Philo is turning the very straightforward meaning of the biblical text against itself. Philo uses the potential reference to a plurality of divine beings into a message of, not only the singularity of God, but the perfection of a God uncontaminated by the messy realities of the created order. God punishes sin and God creates—but indirectly. The allegorical meaning is meant to subvert the basic message of a cultural classic which portrays a deity engaged in questionable activity.

Philo is also concerned with what is meant by the term confusion (σύγχυσις). He opens his discussion by asking “what things resemble confusion?” Confusion, so Philo thinks, might be thought to relate to various sorts of mixtures. God, in confusing the Babelites, is “separating” their mixture. Here he notes that there are two sorts of mixture—he terms them “mechanical” (μῖξις) and “chemical” (κρᾶσις). The former type deals with the mixture of dry substance that cannot entirely combine; the original elements remain. Chemical mixtures are similar. The various elements are mixed, perhaps, in a much more thorough fashion: “Chemical mixture is not juxtaposition, but the mutual co-extension and complete interpenetration of dissimilar parts” (*Conf.* 185). Special steps are required to bring about the separation of the original elements—but separation is still possible. Philo concludes, therefore, that neither notion of mixture quite fits the term confusion. Something more must be meant by the term σύγχυσις. In confusing the work of the Babelites, God is doing more than simply reversing the combination of vices the builders have used to mold their edifice. Rather,

confusion is the annihilation of the original varieties or qualities (σύγχυσις δὲ ἐστὶ φθορὰ τῶν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ποιότητων πᾶσι τοῖς μέρεσιν), which become coextensive though all the parts and thus produce a single and quite different quality.
(*Conf.* 187)

Philo makes use of ancient pharmacology to explain his understanding of confusion as a mixing-up of substance to such a degree and in such a way that their original constitutive parts are no longer able to be recovered. This divine confusion of the Babelites is actually a great gift. In God’s call to confuse the tower builders, he is working at all levels to eradicate both the product of their unitary speech and the individual voices of vice which colluded together to bring about the corrupt city and tower.

But when God threatens impious thoughts with confusion, He does not order merely the annihilation of the specific nature and properties of each individual vice. The order applies also to the aggregate to which they have con-

tributed. He means that neither their separate parts, nor yet their united body and voice shall be invested with strength to destroy the better element.

(*Conf.* 188)

Philo pauses at this point to allow that those who wish to interpret the passage literally as a narrative explaining the origins of languages should not be criticized, but they have not grasped the deeper meaning of the account. The absolute centrality of the textuality of Scripture is seen here when Philo argues, “surely if he had meant that different languages then originated, he would have applied a more correct term and called it ‘separation’ rather than ‘confusion’” (καίτοι γε εἰ διαλέκτων γένεσιν αὐτὸ μόνον ἐδήλου, κἂν ὄνομα εὐθυβολώτερον ἐπεφήμισεν ἀντὶ συγχύσεως διάκρισιν) (*Conf.* 191). Once again: Words can be used inappropriately, but not by Moses.

The treatise closes with a note of hope. What is the purpose of the dispersion of the people? Philo makes one final distinction, that between “sowing (σπείρειν)” and “dispersing” (διέσπερειν). The former is a positive, life-giving activity, while the latter is a cause of misfortune.

For while sowing is the cause of good, dispersing or sowing broadcast is the cause of ill. The purpose of the first is to improve, to increase, to create something else; the purpose of the second is to ruin and destroy. (*Conf.* 196)

How then are we to see hope in this final note of divine dispersion? An intertextual reference to Deut 30:4 brings the treatise to a close.

For when these are scattered, those who have been living in exile for many a day under the ban of folly's tyranny, shall receive their recall under a single proclamation, even the proclamation enacted and ratified by God, as the oracles shew, in which it is declared that “if thy dispersion be from one end of heaven to the other (ἐὰν ᾗ ἢ διασπορά σου ἀπ’ ἄκρου τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἕως ἄκρου τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) he shall gather thee from hence”. (*Conf.* 197)

This is a remarkable re-contextualization by Philo. The Alexandrian allegorist makes use of a divine promise to the people of Israel about their own future and re-applies it to the inner life of the virtue seeking soul. Philo translates the punishment meted out upon the Babelites as an act of divine grace that permits the soul that strives to see God the future ability to do so correctly. The language of dispersion itself is exegetically connected to a dispersion which is “from the heavens.” The multivalent nature of the Greek phrase ἄκρου τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, its full theological resonance, must be heard. The oracle of hope and salvation from Deuteronomy proclaims that the people will be returned (literally) from a dispersion in the heights of heaven. Such a verse must have resonated strongly with Philo on both philosophical and personal levels.

5. *Conclusion*

Philo's translation of the narrative of the Tower of Babel is more radical than any other we have encountered. The cultural context in which he lived and wrote shaped in numerous ways his experience of the text of Gen 11:1–9. Where others (pagan and Jewish) saw a primitive narrative, a flawed and capricious deity and an irrational myth, Philo perceived the continuous struggle of the human soul in its upward journey to apprehend the divine realm. What is most amazing in Philo's reading, what requires constant attention, is his commitment to the very language of the Septuagint. Commitment is, perhaps, too weak a word. In his reading and translation of the tower narrative, Philo is bound to the text of Scripture in a manner unlike any other early Jewish interpreter of the text. He begins with the language of Scripture and he very rarely (at least in *Confusion*) makes any argument that is not grounded in the dialect of Moses. Barclay is correct to claim that "while not a literalist, Philo is a textual fundamentalist."¹⁰⁹ Amir's evaluation of Philo's approach to Scripture is proven correct.

The weight of the symbolic meaning is borne by the isolate word, so that the exact wording of the text to be interpreted must be punctiliously attended to. In these works, then, Philo is addressing a reader who has in his head not only the law or the narrative in general, but the exact wording of the biblical text. Practically, only a Jewish reader would be able to follow the arbitrary stringing-together of biblical passages from widely varying contexts, without losing the thread.¹¹⁰

An attempt to follow the thread of scriptural citation has been the central goal of the present chapter. That Philo is capable of such a radical alteration in meaning via a highly conservative approach to Scriptural textuality is a witness to his hermeneutical creativity. It is also a testimony to his conviction that Babel should continue to speak.

¹⁰⁹ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 169.

¹¹⁰ Yehoshua Amir, "Authority and Interpretation of Scripture," 427.

PART III

THE RABBINIC BABEL
MIDRASH AS TRANSLATION

INTRODUCTION TO PART III

ר' יהודה אומר המתרגם פסוק כצורתו הרי זה בדאי
והמוסיף עליו הרי זה מחרף ומגדף

R. Yehuda says: The one who translates a passage literally is a liar, and the one who adds to it is a blasphemer and reviler.¹

1. Introduction

Ancient rabbinic materials provide enormous diversity in their interpretation of the Babel narrative. This is unsurprising at one level. The exegetical diversity is, perhaps, a simple by-product of the incredible variegation of rabbinic literature itself; more readers inevitably produce a more diverse corpus of interpretation. The common practice attested in midrashic literature to record both majority and minority opinions with regard to the interpretation of laws (*halakhah*) and narratives (*aggadah*) lends to a more heterogeneous reading of biblical texts as well.² With specific reference to Babel, I would suggest that the diversity is principally the result of early rabbinic readers struggling with the genuine ambiguity present in the text of Gen 11 and attempting to negotiate potential meanings of the biblical account with larger theological and ideological realities held to be immutable by the rabbinic class.³

¹ *b. Qidd.* 49a with reference to the recitation of Aramaic translations of Torah; *t. Meg.* 3:41. A full discussion of this passage, in both contexts, is presented in Willem F. Smelik, *The Targum of Judges* (OtSt 36; New York: Brill, 1995), 649–656.

² The separation of midrashic compositions into halakhic and aggadic categories, while somewhat useful, is artificial. An early example of a work classified as halakhic midrash, the *Mekhilta de R. Ishmael*, contains a good amount of aggadic/narrative material. It is the case, however, that different sets of hermeneutical rules are operative with regard to the interpretation of legal and narrative material. For a discussion of the hermeneutical rules present in the *Mekhilta*, see Azzan Yadin, *Scripture as Logos: Rabbi Ishmael and the Origins of Midrash* (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

³ I would note that I am not arguing for the existence of a unified 'rabbinic theological system' which would have been universally accepted by all Jews in late antiquity. Many modern interpreters of rabbinic texts would agree that these texts seek to construct a new theological system as much as, if not more than, they mirror an existing system. In large part, the *trans-*

Rabbinic interpreters utilize the account of the building of the tower as they puzzle through a number of pressing theological concerns. The brief account of Babel becomes, in the hands of these rabbis, a template for interrogating the nature of divine justice, comprehending Israel's ultimate place amongst and relationship to the nations of the world, as well as a confession of the on-going graciousness of God and the election of the people of Israel. The rabbinic texts under consideration in this concluding section are not reticent with regard to their condemnation of the 'generation of the dispersion'.⁴ There are, however, also moments of incredible understanding for the builders of the tower on the part of some rabbinic interpreters. All of these readings are attempts by rabbinic readers to place the narrative of Babel into a particular relationship with the larger narrative of God's dealings with Israel and the world.

References to Babel and its tower are, appropriately enough, scattered across a wide swath of rabbinic literature. My goal, therefore, cannot be simply to *catalogue* rabbinic references to Babel, but rather to explore representative interpretations of Babel culled from a select number of sources in rabbinic literature.⁵ Some justification is required for this approach. In the previous chapters, analysis has largely been confined to individual works produced during the Second Temple period which can be tied to a single author. With the turn toward rabbinic literature, we lose the guiding voice of a single author and a discrete body of literature. We enter the sea of not only the Talmud but the larger rabbinic tradition of scriptural interpretation. While the various forms of literature are rightly separated into specific categories (targum, midrash aggadah, etc.), every text explored will draw from the same hermeneutical well: a common approach to the reading and

lational activity of the rabbis with regard to Babel can be viewed as an attempt to (re)shape the narrative in light of rabbinic theological convictions which might be questioned on the basis of the text of Gen 11. For a discussion of the changing status of rabbinic figures in the first four centuries of the common era, see Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 BCE to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 103–128. See also the work of R. Kalmin who demonstrates the *relative* distances of the rabbis from the larger mass of Jews in Palestine and Babylonia respectively. Richard Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁴ The 'generation of the dispersion' is a common rabbinic phrase to refer to the Babelites.

⁵ A comprehensive list of references to the Tower of Babel in rabbinic texts can be found in C. Uehlinger, *Weltreich und 'Eine Rede': Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerzählung (Gen 11, 1–9)* (OBO 101; Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 58–82. Material related to Babel is clustered in three main collections: *Genesis Rabbah* (5th century CE), *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezar* (8–9th century CE) and the *Tanhuma* literature (9th century CE). See below for a discussion of the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible, the targumim.

interpretation of scripture is the foundation for the texts explored in this section.⁶ The starkest distinction is the privilege accorded to the Hebrew text of Babel in rabbinic literature. In a manner dissimilar to the works discussed in the previous chapters, the actual Hebrew text of the narrative of Babel is consistently cited and discussed in the rabbinic translations of Babel. The Hebrew text, additionally, is often placed in clear relationship to other passages from the Hebrew Bible, making the co-texts for the tower explicit in midrashic interpretation. Babel is typically translated, therefore, by means of *commentary* in rabbinic literature.⁷ The transformation of the narrative must occur, therefore, by rather different means. Midrash, as the dominate form of commentary, was the preferred cultural vehicle available to readers seeking to translate the tower into theological terms and concepts more amenable to an emerging rabbinic worldview.

2. Definitions and Presuppositions of Midrash

It is an extreme understatement to claim that midrash is a contested term in scholarly discourse.⁸ James Kugel, in an oft-quoted statement, once

⁶ Rabbinic literature itself struggles to articulate the hermeneutical principles underlying its own approach to reading and interpreting the Hebrew Bible. The tradition points to the seven rules (*middot*) of Hillel, their expansion to 13 under Rabbi Ishmael and their explosion to 32 rules with R. Eliezer ben Yose ha-Galili. For an overview of this traditional designation, see H.L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (2d. ed.; trans. by Markus Bockmuehl; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 15–30. More recently, see the work of Gary Porton, “Exegetical Techniques in Rabbinic Literature,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 7 (2004): 27–51. Most scholars believe these interpretive rules were attempts to describe common practices by later members of the tradition rather than actual early formulations.

⁷ For a discussion of the rise of commentary in ancient Jewish interpretation see the work of Steven Fraade. He provides a basic definition of commentary which generally holds true across temporal and cultural realms: “All commentaries ... can be said to exhibit the following structural traits: they begin with an extended base-text, of which they designate successive subunits for exegetical attention, to each of which they attach a comment or chain of comments, which nevertheless remain distinct from the base-text, to which the commentary sooner or later returns (that is, advances) to take up the next selected subunit in sequence” (Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* [Judaica: Hermeneutics, Mysticism, and Religion; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1991], 1–2); Steven D. Fraade, “Rewritten Bible and Rabbinic Midrash as Commentary,” in *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash* (ed. Carol Bakhtos; JSJSup 106; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 59–78.

⁸ Carol Bakhtos provides a concise overview of the various definitions offered for midrash over the course of the past half-century, see “Method(ological) Matters in the Study of Midrash,” in *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash* (ed. Carol Bakhtos; JSJSup 106; Leiden:

introduced midrash by stating that “since (previous) studies have already not defined midrash in ample detail, there is little purpose in our not defining it here again.”⁹ Gary Porton has suggested that the lack of a clear and consistent definition of midrash may be the result of the various uses of the term attested in rabbinic literature itself.

Within the Rabbinic texts themselves, the term has three distinct meanings. Midrash refers to the *process* of interpreting biblical texts, the *collections* of biblical interpretations, and the *interpretations* themselves.¹⁰

Furthermore, the relationship of midrash as a reading approach to other reading strategies in evidence during the Second Temple period is a matter of on-going debate.¹¹ Steven Fraade has argued that the relationship is unclear because scholars are not “clear or consistent as to what precisely they are comparing between rabbinic scriptural interpretation and its antecedents.”¹² It is undeniable that Jews during the Second Temple period were already reading the Hebrew Bible in ways attested to in later midrashic texts.¹³ They were not, however, producing texts similar in form or function to those produced during the first half-millennium of the Common Era; neither were the underlying hermeneutical rationales always identical. Most directly for our purposes, the rhetorical goals and intended audiences of midrash are quite different than those of rewritten Bible texts.

Brill, 2006), 162–167; see, in addition, Gary Porton, “Definitions of Midrash,” in *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism* (eds. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 520–534. The classic work on midrash aggadah is the work of Yizhaq Heinemann, *Darkhei ha'Aggadah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1970); Y. Heinemann's work exists only in modern Hebrew and is largely known to English speaking scholarship through the synopsis of Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 2–11; see also the important work of David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

⁹ James Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” in *Midrash and Literature* (ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 91.

¹⁰ Gary Porton, “Rabbinic Midrash: Public or Private?” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 5 (2002):141–142.

¹¹ A recent discussion of the relationship between midrash and Second Temple hermeneutics is found in Steven D. Fraade, “Rabbinic *Midrash* and Ancient Jewish Biblical Interpretation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 99–120. See also Steven D. Fraade, “Rewritten Bible and Rabbinic Midrash as Commentary,” 59–78.

¹² *Ibid.*, 101.

¹³ James Kugel's scholarly oeuvre is an extended argument, in essence, for the continuity of exegetical traditions and hermeneutical practices from the Second Temple period throughout the early rabbinic period.

There is one central rabbinic presupposition which it is necessary to know in order to comprehend midrash and the shift from Second Temple hermeneutics. The absolutely divine and inimitable nature of the text of Scripture was axiomatic on the part of those responsible for the production of midrashic texts. The closing of the biblical canon created a unique relationship between text and interpreter which had not previously existed in ancient Judaism. A new canonical consciousness resulted in a shifting hermeneutic. Scripture was authoritative not only with regard to the narratives or practices it communicated, but increasingly in the very form and language with which it communicated them.¹⁴ Reflecting on this new relationship between Judaism and its scripture, Michael Fishbane comments:

The closure of the scriptural canon ... changes matters fundamentally. Indeed, there is now an 'in' and an 'out'—a within and without, so to speak. And since God's Word (speech) is deemed comprehensive and sufficient for human culture in all its historical diversity, it is only within the existent divine words that new meanings can arise. Accordingly, the effect of the closure is to transform the many separate units (and contexts) of biblical speech into the *one* speech (and context) of Scripture. Everything must be found in it.¹⁵

The closure of the canon of the Hebrew Bible certainly did not take place at one moment in the history of ancient Judaism, of course. The above quote could even apply (with a few important modifications) to the work of Philo of Alexandria. But it is generally agreed that the production of rabbinic midrash *as such* is secondary to and deeply connected with the closing of the canon. This is witnessed most clearly in Porton's own definition of midrash:

Rabbinic midrash is an oral or written literature composed by the rabbis that has its starting point in a fixed, canonical text. In midrash, this original text, considered the revealed word of God by the midrashist and his audience, is explicitly cited or clearly alluded to.¹⁶

The rabbinic Babel, therefore, takes place on the other side of the canonical divide from the rewritten Babel. The interpretive freedoms enjoyed by the authors of rewritten Babels are not available to the producers of the rabbinic Babel. The text of Gen 11 is now clearly part of the closed system of Scripture.

¹⁴ I do not intend to argue that reverence for *the word* of scripture emerged for the first time during the rabbinic period, only that it became hermeneutically foundational during this period.

¹⁵ Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 12.

¹⁶ Gary G. Porton, "Definitions of Midrash," 520. This is only the most recent articulation of a definition of midrash by Porton.

Indeed, the notion of a closed system is central for Fishbane's understanding of midrash. He underscores the radical rabbinic commitment to the text of Scripture as divine speech. It is the nature of Scripture as revelatory and divine speech which animates all rabbinic readings of Babel.

Scripture is reconceived as the multiform expressions of divine revelation—beginning with the individual letters of its words, and including all the phrases and sentences of Scripture. These all become the constituents of possibility in the opening of Scripture from *within* ... Scripture becomes a closed and unified system of language with particular possibilities for linking words and phrases.¹⁷

Babel can only be interpreted by the Hebrew Bible itself in such a hermeneutical context. Rewritten Bible may engage in many of the same theological and exegetical convictions concerning the Hebrew Bible, but midrash carries these convictions to their furthest conclusion. In the rabbinic system, scripture can only be translated by means of scripture.

3. Between Exegesis and Ideology

Two basic questions drawn from the academic study of midrash are pertinent for understanding the rabbinic Babel. Is midrash primarily exegetical or ideological literature? Or, is it both? The second question is related to the first and concerns the setting-in-life of midrash. What was the institutional home for the production of midrash, the synagogue or the school-house? In the words of Gary Porton, should midrashic activity be conceived of as 'public' or 'private?' I would highlight that purpose is inevitably tied to presumed audience. An answer to one of the questions above will always evoke an answer to the other.

The modern history of rabbinic scholarship has witnessed a lengthy debate on the *exegetical* versus *ideological* nature of midrashic texts. A representative quote by Joseph Heinemann supports the latter option, aggadic midrash as a vehicle for rabbinic ideology:

The aggadists do not mean so much to clarify difficult passages in the biblical text as to take a stand on the burning questions of the day, to guide the people and strengthen their faith.¹⁸

¹⁷ Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination*, 12.

¹⁸ Joseph Heinemann, "The Nature of the Aggadah," in *Midrash and Literature* (eds. Geoffrey H. Hartmann and Sanford Budick; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 49. In his own discussion of this passage, Boyarin is quick to assert that Heinemann's "full judgment

Heinemann imagines midrash as a vehicle for the communication of rabbinic theological convictions:

In order to present their ideas in a more comprehensive and engaging fashion, the sages cast them in a narrative format and employed parables and other familiar literary means which appeal to all.¹⁹

The exegetical element of midrashic activity is downplayed, although not denied outright.

The other end of the spectrum is characterized by the “verso-centric” approach²⁰ of James Kugel who states that:

... most of the narrative expansions found in rabbinic midrash and other early texts have as their point of departure some peculiarity in the biblical text itself. That is to say, these expansions, whatever other motives and concerns may be evidenced in them, are formally a kind of biblical exegesis. For there is a tendency in readers ... to regard them as mere ‘poetic flights’, or as expressions of some political/theological program that came to be associated, more or less at random, with one part or another of the biblical text.²¹

Kugel is correct to highlight the exegetical basis for the production of meaning in midrash. He is, nevertheless, quick to remind his readers that exegesis is not a value free activity. “The early exegete is an expositor with an axe to grind!”²² He remains, however, an expositor in the final analysis. For Kugel, when ancient Jews, including those responsible for the creation of the midrashic collections, turn to Scripture they are interested first and foremost with *interpreting* it.

The choice between *ideologue* and *expositor* is a false one.²³ One need not choose between an exegetical and ideological approach to midrashic

and understanding of aggadah (midrash) ... is, in fact, much more nuanced than this single quotation would indicate” (Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, 131–132).

¹⁹ Heinemann, “The Nature of the Aggadah,” 49.

²⁰ Bakhos, “Method(ological) Matters in the Study of Midrash,” 169–170.

²¹ James Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Afterlife of Biblical Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 247–248.

²² *Ibid.*, 248.

²³ Both sides of the debate would probably agree that ideology and exegesis must be held together in tension. Larger debates concerning the nature of Judaism in antiquity, however, have led a number of scholars of midrash to overemphasize one aspect of the pair. Bakhos is especially helpful in this regard. She argues that one's definition of midrash is determinative of the methodology employed to interpret it, resulting in an overvaluation of either exegesis or ideology. In an alliterative phrase she holds that “definitional differences delimit competing contexts” (Bakhos, “Method(ological) Matters in the Study of Midrash,” 167).

literature. Fraade discusses these two ends of the spectrum under the headings of the “hermeneuticist” and “historicist” fallacy:

The former tendency is to see the commentary primarily in its facing toward Scripture and to view hermeneutical practice as if conducted within a socio-historical isolation booth into which only the commentator and the chosen text, or self-contained corpus of texts, are allowed entrance. The latter tendency is to see the commentary primarily in its facing towards the events and circumstances of its time, and to view its response to and representation of those events as being only slightly veiled by the formal guise of the scriptural exegesis in which it is wrapped.²⁴

A more nuanced understanding of the relationship of ideology and exegesis in the production of rabbinic midrash would hold that exegesis is *one, preferred cultural vehicle* for the production and dissemination of rabbinic ideology.²⁵ These two elements must be held in tension in our reading and analysis of rabbinic midrash. Both elements are present in midrashic interpretation of Scripture and neither can be removed from a responsible evaluation of midrashic literature.

A related issue of concern deals with the social location for the production of midrashic texts. A grasp of the social location of the early midrash collections is an important prerequisite for interpreting midrash as an attempt at translation. One of the earliest modern scholars of midrash, Leopold Zunz, argued that midrash was best viewed as reflecting a homiletical act.²⁶ He suggested that the classical midrashic collections (particularly those dealing with narrative material like Babel, as opposed to legal texts) were the written transcripts of sermons delivered in ancient synagogues.²⁷ The interpretation of Scripture found in midrashic texts, therefore, was a reading intended for the common people, a lay audience. The synagogue, therefore, was the institution responsible for the production and preservation of midrashic materials. In her overview of methods for the study of midrash, Lieve Teugels suggests that Zunz was overly influenced by his own cultural and religious context in this regard:

²⁴ Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 14.

²⁵ A text such as the Mishnah, while certainly not midrashic, also engages in the dissemination of rabbinic ideology.

²⁶ Leopold Zunz, *Gottesdienstliche Vorträge der Juden, historisch entwickelt: ein Beitrag zur Alterthumskunde und biblischen Kritik, zur Literatur- und Religionsgeschichte* (Frankfurt a. M.: J. Kauffmann, 1892).

²⁷ Porton, “Rabbinic Midrash: Public of Private,” 146 ff.

Zunz wanted to lay the foundations on which the sermons of the rabbis in the reformed synagogues could be revived, after a period of sad neglect. Moreover, as an heir of German Romanticism, Zunz considered the study of the main Jewish national heritage, the traditional literary sources, as a 'moral' and 'national duty' which would ultimately unite the study with the authentic 'spirit' of his people.²⁸

While a belief in the connection between sermon and midrash persists as a minority perspective within the modern field of rabbinic studies,²⁹ the majority of modern interpreters have pointed to certain insurmountable barriers with connecting midrash to the public institution of the synagogue. Porton has demonstrated at length that there is very little evidence for 'preaching' as such in the late antique synagogues.³⁰ Viewing midrash as the written transcript of sermons preached in these synagogues is, therefore, an anachronistic retrojection of later Jewish practice into an earlier period. In contrast, Porton holds that:

the majority of evidence suggests that midrash originated in rabbinic school-houses, out of the rabbis' need to appropriate and interact with the Hebrew Bible as part of the revelation of Sinai.³¹

Midrash is pictured as an inner-rabbinic dialogue. Porton asserts that midrash "may have developed for the moral and intellectual edification of rabbis alone" and the midrashic method itself clearly served as a particular cultural value in that "within the context of the Rabbinic academy and the Rabbinic class, one's ability to interpret the Bible gave the sage status."³² There is virtually no evidence, however, to support a 'preaching rabbis' paradigm for the interpretation of midrash.

²⁸ Lieve Teugels, "Two Centuries of Midrash Study: A Survey of Some Standard Works on Rabbinic Midrash and Its Methods," *NedTT* 54 (2000): 128.

²⁹ One exponent of 'preaching rabbis' is Avigdor Shinan who states that "in the synagogues of Eretz-Yisrael in the Talmudic period—approximately between 200 and 600 CE—we should remind ourselves that in addition to praying and reading from Scriptures, those attending were usually listening to a sermon and to the simultaneous translation of the reading into Aramaic" (A. Shinan, "Sermons, Targums, and the Reading from Scriptures in the Ancient Synagogues," in *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity* [ed. Lee I. Levine; Philadelphia: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1987], 98). Porton is quick to point out that "Nowhere in his article does Shinan cite any Rabbinic evidence of the practice of delivering sermons" (Porton, "Rabbinic Midrash: Public or Private," 146).

³⁰ Porton, "Rabbinic Midrash: Public or Private," 146–156.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

³² *Ibid.*, 155. For a discussion of exegetical agility as it relates to cultural status within rabbinic circles, see the work of Jeffery Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 67–79.

While midrash probably served many purposes for the rabbis of late antiquity, there is no clear reason to assume that it derived *primarily* from the synagogues or from the rabbis' attempts, through sermons, to bring their interpretations of the Bible to the average Jew.³³

There is sometimes a parallel argument that the nature of midrashic argumentation and its exegetical sophistication makes a 'common' audience for midrash unlikely. Midrashic logic can appear ponderous to the uninitiated and its exegetical reasoning arcane and opaque. How likely is it, ask certain scholars, that a largely illiterate population of ancient Jews would have been capable of following the arguments found in rabbinic texts?

The approach to rabbinic midrash adopted in the concluding chapter is one which views midrash as a cultural product of rabbinic Judaism as well as a means for the continuing production of rabbinic Judaism. I reject the notion that one must choose between an ideological and exegetical approach to the literature. I am largely in agreement with those scholars who view midrash as internally directed dialogue in circulation within the rabbinic class.

What I wish to examine is the content of midrashic reflection on the narrative of Babel and how such reflection is a response to the social, cultural, and theological contexts of those who produced it. In this regard, I follow the method adopted by Bakhos in her recent study of the figure of Ishmael in rabbinic texts. In the introduction to her study, she claims that "our study of how depictions of biblical characters differ from one period to the next thus yields insight into the historical situation of the rabbis."³⁴ Bakhos places the analysis of midrashic texts firmly in the field of cultural poetics. She claims that in recent academic study of rabbinic texts:

... there has been a shift from a textualist context to historical contextualism. In defining literature as an inextricable aspect of the matrix of culture that reflects, transmits and transforms norms, meanings, and signs, cultural poetics thus breaks down the once firmly-rooted monoliths—literature and history—and constructs a more complexly integrated paradigm for under-

³³ Porton, "Rabbinic Midrash: Public or Private," 153.

³⁴ Carol Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab* (Judaica: Hermeneutics, Mysticism and Religion; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2006), 8. Her argument is, in short, that the rise of Islam and the association of Ishmael with Arab conquests leave an exegetical trace in rabbinic texts dealing with the character of Ishmael. Prior to the advent of Islam, Ishmael was treated as generic 'Other' or, by association with his descendant Esau, viewed as an image of (Christian) Rome. Following the spread of Islam, Ishmael is increasingly associated with the specific 'Other' of Islam in later midrashic collections.

standing the inextricably bound relationship between the literariness of a text and its role in culture, society and history. Indeed current works in the study of midrash exemplify an approach that places the text in its immediate historical moment to locate the ways in which it may inscribe, negate, contest or inflect, often for ideological or socio-political reasons.³⁵

Such an approach is amenable to the one adopted throughout the present work. A particular reading or 'translation' of Babel can provide a window into the concerns or anxieties of the person and/or culture responsible for its production.³⁶ Historical reductionism is always a danger with this type of approach. The exegetical nature of midrash provides, therefore, a useful counterbalance against a temptation to read rabbinic midrash as simply ideologically or culturally conditioned literature. A careful reading, however, can view midrash as ideology in exegetical form.

4. Conclusion

The discussion above points to one salient contrast between the rabbinic Babel and the rewritten Babels engaged in Part II: a move from translations of Babel which seek to *persuade*, argue for a particular vision of Judaism to both Jewish and Gentile audiences, to those which have as their goal the *consolidation* of a worldview by means of biblical text and its exegesis. The narrative of Babel, in the rewritten texts, was used as a point of departure or narrative cipher for the discussion of other issues of concern: a definition of Israel as those who retain the sacred language and thereby possess pure revelation (*Jubilees*), Israel's relationship to the nations and the meaning of faithfulness in crisis (*Pseudo-Philo*), warnings against political unrest and rebellion (*Judean Antiquities*), anti-apocalyptic arguments and the eternal nature of divine justice (*3 Baruch*), or an attempt to synchronize the teachings of Moses with the culturally dominant model of philosophical inquiry (*On the Confusion of Tongues*). In each case, the producers of these rewritten Babels sought to persuade an unspecified or mixed audience to read Babel in light of the various concerns held by each producer. With the turn to rabbinic literature we witness a group of readers translating the tower as part of a specifically internal dialogue. This is not an act of interpretive persuasion, but of theological consolidation and reproduction. Babel is, in

³⁵ Carol Bakhtos, "Method(ological) Matters in the Study of Midrash," 181–182.

³⁶ An excellent example of this approach can be found in Philip S. Alexander, "Pre-Emptive Exegesis: Genesis Rabbah's Reading of the Story of Creation," *JJS* 43 (1992): 230–245.

other words, 'rabbinized' to bring the narrative into line with the dominant assumptions and theologies of those responsible for the production of early rabbinic texts.

It would be unwise to draw too strong a contrast between the rewritten and rabbinic incarnations of Babel, however. Many of the rewritten versions of Babel were also quite concerned with bringing the biblical text of Gen 11 into line with larger theological realities held to be immutable by their authors. The producers of the rabbinic Babel were, likewise, concerned with utilizing Babel to present their own arguments and ideologies. But both the producers and audiences of the respective groups of works were quite different. The rewritten Babels above were largely for external consumption. The Rabbinic Babel, in contrast, was intended for internal rabbinic dissemination. The authors of rewritten Babels were translating the tower as an attempt to persuade others (fellow Jews and non-Jews); rabbinic readers translated the tower into their own theological language but did not attempt to persuade anyone other than themselves. The exegetical work of the two groups does overlap in significant ways but can usefully be divided along the axis of persuasion versus consolidation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A JUST TRANSLATION: READING THE RABBINIC BABEL IN *GENESIS RABBAH*

כל ישראל יש להם חלק לעולם הבא ...
דור המבול אין להם חלק לעולם הבא ...
דור הפלגה אין להם חלק לעולם הבא ...

All Israel has a portion in the world-to-come ...

The generation of the Flood has no portion in the world-to-come ...

The generation of the dispersion has no portion in the world-to-come.

m. Sanhedrin 10:1–2

1. *Introduction*

The mishnaic passage above presents a simple and straightforward lesson. In their exclusion from ‘the world-to-come’ the generation of the dispersion (i.e., the Babelites) are classed with the generation of the Flood and distinguished from ‘all Israel.’ Based on this tradition, one could speculate that rabbinic readers would consistently be hostile towards the generation of the dispersion. Babel and Israel would represent opposite ends of a theological spectrum, ontologically distinct entities. It is curious, therefore, that when we turn to rabbinic readings of Babel the relationship between the Babelites and Israel is much more contested and complicated. The final translations of the tower to be discussed present Babel not only as *Other*, but also as a mirror to and reminder for Israel, as an image of human failing, and even as a witness to the gracious nature of the God of Israel.¹

Two closely related issues must be addressed before exploring the translation of the tower in rabbinic circles. How does one determine which rabbinic

¹ For a recent discussion of the *Other* in rabbinic texts, see C. Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab* (Judaica: Hermeneutics, Mysticism and Religion; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2006), 47–84.

texts to select for analysis? What criteria should be used? The selection below has been narrowed in two ways. First, I have allowed the rabbinic comparison between the generation of the Flood and the generation of the dispersion, located in the mishnaic passage above, to determine which midrashim I select for analysis. A second delimitation is documentary in nature. I have chosen to focus my reflections on a single text and its reception of the Babel narrative—allowing other works to inform the readings suggested here. The following discussion of the rabbinic Babel is based on *Genesis Rabbah* because of that text's pre-eminent status within the rabbinic canon. Jacob Neusner articulates this work's privileged position:

Genesis Rabbah presents the first complete and systematic Judaic commentary on the book of Genesis. In normative and classical Judaism ... *Genesis Rabbah* ... takes an important position. This great rabbinic commentary to Genesis ... provides a complete and authoritative account of how Judaism proposes to read and make sense of the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures.²

This fifth century collection of rabbinic traditions concerning the book of Genesis is useful for exploring the reception and transformation of the tower narrative for a number of reasons.³ While *Genesis Rabbah* is not exhaustive, it certainly does not contain *every* rabbinic tradition concerning Babel, it is highly representative. It is rare to find a tradition elsewhere that is not present (in some form) in this work. Furthermore, *Genesis Rabbah* oftentimes contains exegetical traditions in very early articulations. I will proceed, therefore, by exploring interpretive traditions contained in *Genesis Rabbah*—noting significant parallels found in other rabbinic works.⁴

² Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis. A New American Translation. Volume I Parashiyot One through Thirty-Three on Genesis 1:1 to 8:14* (BJS 104; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), ix–x. In addition, Philip Alexander has pointed to the iconic status of *Genesis Rabbah* within later Jewish interpretive literature. “Rashi, for example, relies heavily on it (*Genesis Rabbah*) in his *Commentary on Genesis*, and he cites it by name more than any other single source” (Philip Alexander, “Pre-Emptive Exegesis: Genesis Rabbah’s Reading of the Story of Creation,” *JJS* 43 [1992]: 232).

³ For an overview of arguments concerning the dating of *Genesis Rabbah*, see H.L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (ed. and trans. Marcus Bockmuehl; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 276–283. See also Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 355–381.

⁴ The issue of chronology is a difficult one with regard to rabbinic literature. I attempt to eschew chronological arguments as such. At no point will I advocate for a development of a rabbinic tradition. For this reason, I speak of rabbinic texts as being in *dialogue* with one another, rather than *responding* to one another. A response implies certitude about chronology which we do not possess with rabbinic literature. The central exception in this

Genesis Rabbah will remain, therefore, the interpretive thread which will guide the discussion to come.⁵ What follows is a hermeneutical commentary centering on the exegetical methods and conclusions of the rabbinic traditions contained in the earliest rabbinic commentary on the book of Genesis.⁶

An additional bit of clarification is in order for the approach to *Genesis Rabbah* utilized here in contrast to the method adopted by Neusner. For Neusner, the previous history of the exegetical or interpretive traditions contained in *Genesis Rabbah* are less important than the final, redacted form of the larger work. It is the document-as-such that has ultimate meaning, not the individual anonymous or pseudonymous interpretive traditions.⁷ “What

regard is the assumption that the Mishnah's exclusion of the generation of the dispersion from the world-to-come generally pre-dates and informs the midrashim discussed below.

⁵ All references to the Hebrew text of *Genesis Rabbah* will be to the critical edition by Theodor and Albeck. J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary*. 3 vols. (with corrections; Berlin, 1912–1936; repr., Jerusalem, 1965). Translations from Hebrew are my own.

⁶ The focus on *Genesis Rabbah* means that a number of other works from the rabbinic period are excluded from examination below. Most directly it produces the uncomfortable situation that a work on the ‘translation’ of Babel in Jewish antiquity largely ignores the parade example of rabbinic translational activity, the targumim. This exclusion is justified by the nature of the material present regarding Babel in the targumic tradition. With regard to Gen 11:1–9, there are no significant exegetical traditions contained in Targum Onqelos, Pseudo-Jonathan, or Neofiti which are not represented also in *Genesis Rabbah*. (The sole exception is a tradition found in Pseudo-Jonathan Gen 11:6 that 70 angels descended with God to scatter the Babelites and produce the 70 nations which some ancient Jews held composed the known world.) The exclusion is further justified on the basis of the intended audience of targumic texts. Evidence from rabbinic literature (*b. Berakoth* 8a; *j. Megillath* IV, 1) makes it clear that targumic texts were intended for recitation in the context of services in the synagogue. These were popular texts as opposed to a scholastic work like *Genesis Rabbah*. For a general introduction to many of the issues related to the Palestinian Targum tradition, see Martin MacNamara, *Targum Neofiti I: Genesis* (ArBib 1A; Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 1–46. For a recent discussion of the story of Babel in the liturgical poetry from the fifth century CE, see Laura Lieber, “The Poet and the Tower-Builders: A Translation and Analysis of Yannai's Piyyut for Genesis 11,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 5 (2005): 163–188 and her book length treatment in Lieber, *Yannai on Genesis: An Invitation to Piyyut* (Monographs of the Hebrew Union College; Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 2010).

⁷ The documentary approach to rabbinic literature is virtually synonymous with the work of Neusner. In a representative quote from his many works he argues that “midrash-exegesis of Scripture reaches us in distinctive documents, and the first (though not the last) point of entry into the reading and interpretation of midrash-exegesis finds location in the document: hence, documentary discourse” (J. Neusner, *Midrash as Literature: The Primacy of Documentary Discourse* [Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987], xii). In this quote, Neusner leaves open the *theoretical possibility* of other points of entry into the interpretation of midrash-exegesis. In practice, however, Neusner typically rejects any other point of entry.

I wish to learn," Neusner claims in the introduction to his own translation of the work, "is how the people who made the document as we know it made an important statement through both what they presented and how they presented it."⁸ *Genesis Rabbah*, for Neusner, is a response by the sages of Israel to the ascendancy and dominance of Christianity in the new age of Constantine. Christian exegetes certainly possessed their own distinctive way of reading and appropriating the Hebrew Bible which (presumably) called forth a response from rabbinic readers. The sages of Israel needed to respond to a Christian exegetical-takeover. *Genesis Rabbah* is a counter-argument, an extended exegetical polemic, against the theological claims made by Christianity about the teleological aspect of history and its culmination in the coming of Christ Jesus. In order to fight this interpretive battle

[The sages] worked out a view of history consisting in a rereading of the book of Genesis in light of the entire history of Israel, read under the aspect of eternity, as realized in the fourth century. The book of Genesis then provided a complete, typological interpretation of everything that had happened as well as a reliable picture of what, following the rules of history laid down in Genesis, was going to happen in the future.⁹

The individual interpretive traditions, whatever their exegetical or historical origin, are to be understood in their redacted form, a form which is driven by theological proposition.¹⁰

My own approach does not attempt to impose a single purpose on the redaction of traditions related to Babel, although I do detect an underlying concern. I am convinced that attempting to read every (or even most) interpretive traditions contained in *Genesis Rabbah* in light of Jewish-Christian polemic is an exercise in reductionism. While one can not deny that inter-religious debate is essential to making sense of *Genesis Rabbah*, it is also the

⁸ Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, xi.

⁹ Jacob Neusner, "Rabbinic Midrash in Historical Context, the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," in *The Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism* (ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 711.

¹⁰ In connection with the public-private debate discussed above, *Genesis Rabbah* is a clear example of inner-rabbinic exegesis. P. Alexander places the composition of the work firmly in the school-house and views the finished product as an academic exercise. "Genesis Rabbah, like all the classical Midrashim, is a thoroughly scholastic text, and it contrasts with the more popular tradition of Bible interpretation reflected in the Palestinian Targumim" (Alexander, "Pre-Emptive Exegesis," 232.) Alexander is less dogmatic concerning the *origin* of exegetical traditions which he holds most certainly derived from a tradition of public preaching that moves slowly, over time, into the realm of the school-house.

case that numerous elements of the text betray absolutely no concern with the issue. For that reason, my own reading of the rabbinic Babel in *Genesis Rabbah* will explore interpretive traditions first as 'exegesis' and only afterwards in light of numerous theological propositions which intersect with the interpretation of Gen 11. It is extremely difficult, however, to isolate the 'theology' present in any collection of midrashic texts. David Stern has argued that:

Few steps are more difficult to take—and more prone to error—than the move from exegesis to theology. The problem of deriving the rabbis' religious beliefs from their commentaries is, in one sense, a mere subset of the larger methodological challenge involved in deriving theme from exegesis and extrapolating a proposition from an interpretation.¹¹

It is a scholarly common-place to suggest that the rabbis were not engaged in the construction of a systematic theology; and it would certainly be a misreading of the midrashim related to Babel to attempt to construct such a systematic theology for the rabbis. Stern is correct that midrash is "programmatically unsystematic."¹² Yet there are certain themes and concerns which the Babelian midrashim collected in *Genesis Rabbah* touch upon. Redaction may not lead to systematization, but it is clearly a form of selection. That selection must certainly rely (in part) on some issue or topic which is troubling to those doing the selecting. The interpretive challenge faced in what follows is to discern some order in the midst of the programmatically unsystematic selection and collection by fifth century rabbis of exegetical traditions related to the building of the Tower of Babel.¹³

¹¹ David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Study* (Rethinking Theory; Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 73.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ An additional methodological problem concerns the importance of redaction itself. I am comfortable arguing that selection of certain interpretive traditions provides some insight with regard to the theological concerns and ideological program(s) of the compilers of *Genesis Rabbah*. I am less certain, however, that one can easily determine some purpose or meaning with regard to the *internal redactional form* in which various midrashim appear. The commentary form into which the midrashic traditions contained in *Genesis Rabbah* are fitted makes it very difficult to determine if one midrash should be read in light of a previous or subsequent midrash in the series. My approach is to isolate the smallest exegetical unit—individual midrashim—and attempt to explicate them without necessarily referencing the larger context in which they currently appear.

2. *The Sin of Babel as a Relative Affair:
Moral Status and Divine Justice*

A major topic or theme driving the interpretation of Babel in *Genesis Rabbah* is the question of God's justice. If there is a unifying theme binding these disparate midrashim together, it is the theological conviction of the justness of God's relationship with the created world. How does this concern take exegetical form with regard to Gen 11? I have noted on numerous occasions the presumed relationship between the Flood narrative and the account of the Tower of Babel. Rabbinic readers, too, often read the stories in light of one another. The hermeneutical principle in this regard is that contiguity of narrative should be treated as continuity of plot. In fact, the very location of Babel's tower, the plain of Shinar, was viewed as divinely encoded evidence for narrative continuity between the two stories. A tradition twice contained in the Babylonian Talmud (in *b. Šabb* 113b and *b. Zebah* 113b) claims that Shinar was so named because "the dead of the flood were shaken out there" (ננערו שם).¹⁴ The Babel account begins in the make-shift morgue following the deluge. The presumed relationship conceals an underlying question, a theological itch, which animates and underscores rabbinic discussions of the Babel account. How ought the generation of the dispersion be understood in relation to the generation of the Flood? Was one more or less wicked than the other? More troublesome, how does the interpreter account for the unequal divine response to the actions of these respective generations? According to the rabbis, both stories contain accounts of human sin and divine response. Why, the rabbis wonder, is the response different and what can be inferred from the various responses about the nature of the human

¹⁴ *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezar* (chapter 24) offers another rationale for the name Shinar. The text repeats the tradition of feared animosity between the children of Noah found in Pseudo-Philo and Josephus. An etymological connection is made between the fecundity of the postdiluvian generations and the location of their enterprise. They dwelt in Shinar (שנער), which is named for the vast number of youths (נערים) present in the years after the flood. "Rabbi Eliezar said: They begat their sons and increased and multiplied like a great reptile, six at each birth" (*Pirke R. El* 24) (G. Friedlander, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezar (the chapters of Rabbi Eliezar the Great) according to the text of the manuscript belonging to Abraham Epstein of Vienna* [2d. ed.; trans. Gerald Friedlander; New York: Hermon Press, 1965], 174). The women of Babel apparently gave birth to sextuplets! This results in the land of Shinar being especially populated by numerous young people. It is interesting to recall that Josephus' translation of the narrative also highlights the multitude of youth amongst the Babelites as particularly susceptible to being led astray or, at least, the rise of a new generation marking the rebellion of Nimrod (*A. J.* 1.111).

sin in each account? More importantly, what can be surmised about the nature of God? The question is ultimately one of God's justness in his conduct towards these two errant generations. In his study of the theology of *Genesis Rabbah*, Neusner states that divine justice and mercy are central theological concerns for the rabbinic redactors.

The theological foundation of Rabbinic Judaism is that God is just in all his ways. A mark of God's justice is that he rewards the just and punishes the wicked, always with reason God's justice is exact, rational and logical.¹⁵

Given its allusive and gapped nature, the story of Babel had the potential to call into question the exact, rational, and logical judgment of God for some early rabbinic readers.

Are the generation of the Flood and that of the dispersion held to different standards? It is certainly true that neither generation is granted a "share in the world-to-come" (חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא) (*m. Sanh* 10:3), but their share in this present world was significantly different. The apparent divine mercy extended to the generation of the dispersion is even more marked when one examines the other figures or groups present in *m. Sanh* 10:1–4 as excluded from possessing a share in the world-to-come: the Sodomites, who were instantly and totally destroyed (*Gen* 19); the initial group of Israelites sent to spy-out the land of Canaan in *Num* 14:35, who "died by the plague before Yahweh" for their temerity; the generation of the wilderness, who listened to and believed the report of the spies and also perished in the wilderness; the followers of Korah, who were devoured instantly by the ground for questioning the superiority of Moses (*Num* 16). The only real debate concerning those who *will* have a share in the world-to-come is reserved for the exiled ten tribes of Israel who went into Assyrian captivity. Given the canonical company kept by the Babelites in this list, their punishment seems exceedingly light. Immediacy of punishment and death mark all the other forms of divine chastisement. In the midrashim dealing with Babel in *Genesis Rabbah*, however, the Babelites are explicitly compared only with the generation of the Flood.

In the collection of midrashim analyzed here, the rabbis are translating the tower in light of larger rabbinic notions of divine justice. We might even claim that they are seeking a divine moral order in the rubble of Babel. The unequal divine response to these two generations is the foundational

¹⁵ Jacob Neusner, "Theology of *Genesis Rabbah*," in *The Encyclopedia of Midrash*, 113.

observation utilized in my analysis of these midrashim. I treat it as the original problem encountered by many rabbinic readers. Their attempts to solve this problem, however, take a variety of forms. Perhaps, some reasoned, the Babelites were not as uniformly corrupt as were the contemporaries of Noah (or, implicitly, as the other groups mentioned in the list of those who are without a share in the world-to-come)? Is it possible that their dispersal served a larger goal in the divine economy? God was more gracious with the Babelites, perhaps, than a simple reading of the narrative would suggest. Perhaps God was simply growing weary of starting from scratch with humanity and needed to adopt a more pragmatic approach to his creation. I will explore these various possibilities and their exegetical permutations under four headings: (1) attempts to exculpate the builders of Babel and, thereby, justify the lighter punishment they receive; (2) specification of the 'sin' of Babel; (3) historical and theological contextualization of the Babelites and discussion of the various moral capacities of the primeval generations; (4) a focus, not on the builders of Babel, but on the graciousness of the God of Babel.

3. (Potentially) Positive Interpretations of the Tower Builders

Despite its great ambiguity, the narrative of Gen 11 is very clear that the builders of Babel were scattered, not destroyed *en masse*. Their punishment was, therefore, less than that received by the generation of the Flood. Why did God make a distinction between these two generations? One option is to focus on the human side of the equation and to posit that the Babelites, unlike the generation of the Flood (and the others listed in *m. Sanh.* 10), possessed redeeming qualities of which the reader is not told. They must not have been as uniformly evil as those who were destroyed in the Flood. The Bible certainly does not comment directly on the 'nature' of the Babelites in anything close to the detail it does with regard to those who perished in the Flood. We are told explicitly in connection with the generation of the Flood that:

the LORD saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time (רַק רָע כָּל-הַיּוֹם).
(Gen 6:5)

R. Eleazar, explaining the phrase "few words" in Gen 11:1, highlights the divergent biblical presentation of these two generations: "The deeds of the generation of the Flood were specified, the deeds of the generation of the dispersion were not specified" (מַעֲשֵׂה דוֹר הַפְּלָגָה לֹא נִתְּפַרֵשׁ) (*Gen. Rab.*

38.6.1).¹⁶ Scriptural silence permits the assertion that the Babelites must have possessed certain redeeming qualities. Rabbinic interpreters could thus engage in *exegetical exculpation* by attempting to discern the precise nature of those redeeming qualities which allowed the Babelites to evade the ultimate punishment. Dispersion and the dissolution of linguistic unity would certainly not be a pleasant occurrence, but it is obviously preferable to universal annihilation by inundation.

3.1. *Pax Babel*

Two short passages present the Babelites in something of a favorable light. *Genesis Rabbah* 38.6.3, attempting to resolve the debate concerning the assertion that the Babelites, prior to their dispersion, possessed one language and few words—**וְדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים**—opens the door for a positive understanding. The midrash states:

וְדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים—וְדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים מֵה שְׂבִיד זֶה בִּיד זֶה וּמֵה שְׂבִיד זֶה בִּיד זֶה

“And few words?”—and communal things (possessions): what was in the hand of one was in the hand of the other and vice versa. (*Gen. Rab.* 38.6.3)

Through a common rabbinic interpretive move which reads the term **דְּבָרִים** as either ‘words’ or ‘things,’ the midrash claims that the Babelites possessed property that was held in common.¹⁷ Rather than having one, singular language (i.e., words), they possessed all things, communally. Such an interpretation is accomplished through the insertion of a single letter and a revocalization. Rather than **וְדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים**, the midrashist reads **וְדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים**. While the change is almost imperceptibly minor, the exegetical result is drastic. “Few words” is translated into “communal possessions.”¹⁸ In addition,

¹⁶ Citations to *Genesis Rabbah* follow the traditional enumeration as reflected in Neuser’s translation.

¹⁷ A famous example of playing on the semantic possibilities of the term **דְּבָרִים** is found in *Genesis Rabbah*’s treatment of the near-sacrifice of Isaac in Gen 22 (*Gen. Rab.* 55.1.1ff.). The biblical narrative open with the phrase “and it was after these things.” Some early rabbinic readers took the phrase to mean “after these words” and constructed a number of possibilities for the *content* of the words spoken (e.g., Abraham forcing God to state explicitly that Isaac was the intended object of sacrifice; the creation of a argument between Isaac and Ishmael about who was more faithful, terminating in Isaac bragging that he would be willing to be sacrificed to demonstrate his faithfulness; the Satan challenging the righteousness of Abraham before Yahweh in the form of Job 1). For a full discussion of rabbinic (and later medieval) interpretation of Gen 22, see Judah Goldin, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993).

¹⁸ The insertion of the *waw* changes the second term into a passive participle meaning

a very similar term in Aramaic, אֲחֻדָּתָא, means “possession.”¹⁹ The interpretation may also be driven by the later biblical assertion by the deity that the people are a *true unity* and can, therefore, accomplish anything they desire. They are united in every conceivable fashion—including economically.

This midrashic passage could be seen together with another interpretation, which again attempts to make sense of the different punishments meted out to the Babelites. In comparison with the generation of the Flood, the midrashist informs us that a remnant of the tower builders survived because “they loved one another” (שהיו אוהבים זה לזה) (*Gen. Rab.* 38.6.5). The proof that the Babelites were all of one accord (loved one another) is drawn from the opening verse of Gen 11, which in this context should be translated: “Now the whole earth had one language and communal possessions.”²⁰ It is precisely the economic unity of the tower builders which is contrasted with the generation of the Flood who are charged with committing acts of larceny via a passage from the book of Job: “They remove the boundary-stones, they steal flocks and feed them” (גְּבֻלוֹת יְשִׁיגוּ עֵדֶר גְּזֹלִין) (Job 24:2).²¹ The underlying argument is that the generation of the dispersion possessed some *relative righteousness* in comparison with the generation of the Flood which led to their being scattered rather than destroyed. The unity and peace present at Babel provide substance for the claim of relative righteousness.

“joined or united.” See M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: The Judaica Press, 1996), 38.

¹⁹ Given that those responsible for the production of *Genesis Rabbah* were most likely multi-lingual, it is possible that the Aramaic term may have even suggested the exegetical possibility to an early interpreter. Finding a way to make the same case in rabbinic Hebrew could have been a secondary development. On bi- or tri-lingualism in rabbinic Judaism, see Steven D. Fraade, “Rabbinic Views on the Practice of Targum, and Multilingualism in the Jewish Galilee of the Third-Sixth Centuries,” in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* (ed. Lee I. Levine; New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 253–286.

²⁰ Neusner does not translate the passage in this fashion. *Genesis Rabbah*, in fact, does not explicitly relate these two interpretations. The type of love expressed by the generation of the dispersion—in contrast to the generation of the Flood—makes such a translation a reasonable extrapolation. The love of the people for one another is most clearly demonstrated in the economic realm.

²¹ The final verb translated as “feed” them above is רעה. These three Hebrew letters have a broad semantic range in biblical Hebrew. The verb can mean to pasture an animal or to do evil. L. Kohler and W. Baumgartner, “רעה,” *HALOT* 2:1253–1264. The midrash seems to be pointing to the later option. In addition, the Hebrew עֵדֶר means “herd,” but also, by extension, “watered place” (Kohler and Baumgartner, “עֵדֶר,” *HALOT* 1:793–794).

Another midrash pictures Israel as potentially similar to the Babelties with regard to peace. The theological principle of the power of ‘Peace’ is applied to Israel by the following midrashic text.

גדול שלום שאפילו ישראל עובדים עבודה זרה
ושלום ביניהן אמר המקום [כביכול] איני שולט בהם שנאמר
חבור עצבים אפרים הנח לו אבל אם חלוק לבם מה כתיב
חלק לבם עתה יאשמו

“Great is Peace.” For even if Israel engages in idolatry, but there is peace between them—says the Lord—It is as though²² I cannot have power over them. As Scripture says: “Ephraim is united in the worship of idols, leave him alone” (Hos 4:17).²³ But if there is dissension between them, what is written? “Their heart is divided, now they shall bear their guilt” (Hos 10:2).

(*Gen. Rab.* 38.6.6)

In other words, unity covers a multitude of sins. Even should Israel engage in the most reprobate and egregious of acts, God is (self-)restrained by the presence of peace. The question of God’s justice is thereby answered. God is absolutely just in his dealing with the generation of the dispersion because they possessed something that the generation of the Flood lacked: unity and peace.

There are a number of other elements to note in regard to this midrash. The first is the implicit equation made between Israel and the Babelites. While the midrash is dealing with the tower builders and the power of unity to restrain divine punishment, a larger statement about God’s dealings with Israel is also made. At the very least, one could claim that God acts towards the tower builders in a manner that is consistent with the way in which he acts towards Israel. The Babelites are seen as standing in some moral continuity with the Israelites. In contrast to some interpretive texts which see the ancestors of Israel as separate from and opposed to the generation of the

²² David Stern suggests that the phrase כביכול in rabbinic texts evinces some discomfort with anthropomorphic or anthropopathic language in connection with God (Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 110, n. 9). The issue in this situation is the uncomfortable implication that God is *unable* to exercise moral authority in certain situations. The statement implies a clear limitation on the deity. For a discussion of the phrase, see Miguel Pérez Fernández, *An Introductory Grammar of Rabbinic Hebrew* (trans. John Elwolde; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 176.

²³ The context of the Hosea passage is irrelevant for the midrash. Wolff suggests that the prophetic call to “leave him alone” is based in political expediency. He holds that “the exclamation ... might presuppose the existence of a small band of aggressive men loyally gathered around Hosea. Hosea cautions them; he knows that for the time being Israel’s hardheartedness is unyielding” (Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea* [ed. Paul D. Hanson; trans. Gary Stansell; Hermenia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974], 91).

dispersion, this midrash allows for and encourages a reading of continuity. God deals with the generation of the dispersion in the same manner and according to the same rules he applies to Israel. At the same time, this invocation of 'unified' Babelites also recalls earlier interpretive encounters in which the tower builders state as their motivation the desire not to be separated from one another and thus fall into discord (Pseudo-Philo and Josephus). The Babelites are certainly in the wrong, but they are united in their misguided wrongdoing and their laudable relationship with one another has a profound impact of the form divine justice takes.

In what historical context would such an interpretation of Babelian unity as a relative good arise? Following the destruction of the temple and the slow transformation of Judaism from its multiple Second Temple incarnations into a somewhat unified and consolidated rabbinic form, it is understandable why 'Peace' as such might take on an intrinsically positive value. The function of peace in rabbinic thought and its palliative effect upon divine justice is to be noted. *Avot de Rabbi Natan, Version B* contains a debate between Rabban Gamaliel and a pagan philosopher. The philosopher asks Gamaliel to identify the first-born of creation. "The first born of the world is peace" (ch. 24; ed. Schechter, 49) responds the rabbi.²⁴ Perhaps all Israel could not restrain from violation of Torah law or suddenly have the ability to perform every *mitzvah*. Some theological and legal issues would never be completely resolved in a way that would be acceptable to the multiple inheritors of the tradition. But perhaps the people of Israel *could* aim for 'love of one another' and an ethic which transcended the bitter theological and legal divisions which were perceived to have contributed to the destruction and dispersion of community.²⁵ Some early rabbinic readers saw in the narrative of Babel a similar lesson to the one ascertained by Josephus, but from the other side of the devastation. Unity or love for one's fellow Jew could be relied upon to bring about hope for the future, even hope in the midst of dispersion. Babel, in this hermeneutical constellation, borders on a

²⁴ I am drawing on the work of Menahem Kister, "Some Early Jewish and Christian Exegetical Problems and the Dynamics of Monotheism," *JSJ* 37 (2006): 548–593.

²⁵ A famous Talmudic narrative attributes the destruction of the temple to animosity between two Jewish males. A wealthy resident of Jerusalem throws a banquet and wishes to invite his friend, Kamtza (קמטצא). The invitation, however, is inadvertently delivered to his enemy, Bar-Kamtza (בר קמטצא). This mistake sets in motion a chain of events which terminates in the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans (*b. Git.* 56). The moral is that enmity between members of Israel can quickly spiral out of control with disastrous results for all Israel.

‘type’ or a figure of Israel. The logic would claim that if divine mercy could be extended *even to an idolatrous Babel* on the merit of unity, how much more would God be gracious with a unified Israel? Such benevolent interpretation is a rare moment of sympathy granted to the Babelites in ancient Jewish thought. Only Josephus comes anywhere as close to justifying or excusing the actions of the tower builders explicitly. The image presented by this midrash is one of potentially good but misdirected people engaging in questionable actions. The midrash does not go on to comment at this point on the intent of the builders of Babel, although the citation from the prophet Hosea does raise the issue of idolatry.²⁶ It remains an open question, however, what the people hoped to accomplish or why God was so disturbed by their actions.

3.2. *Koinonia at Babel?*

The assertion that the tower builders held property in common prior to the scattering is intriguing in light of the sole passage in the New Testament which conceivably alludes to the narrative of Babel. One could argue that *Acts of the Apostles* 2:1–47 should be included in any review of ancient Jewish interpretations of the Babel narrative. The story of Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit on the first Christians can be seen as a reversal of the ‘curse’ of Babel.²⁷ The disciples of Jesus, following his ascension, are gathered together:

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.²⁸ (Acts 2:2–4)

²⁶ Redactional questions would complicate the above reading. The claim that the Babelites “loved one another” comes at the conclusion of another midrash discussed below (*Gen. Rab.* 38.6.5) which also raises the issue of idolatry explicitly. The connection between the “idolatry” element and the “love” element, however, is not clear and is likely not an original part of the interpretive tradition. See note 13, above.

²⁷ Fitzmyer, however, makes no connection between Pentecost and the Babel narrative. Rather, he notes linguistic connections between the coming of the Spirit on the Apostles in Acts 2 and the narration of the giving of the Torah in Exod 19–20. The cultic event of Shavuot is the basis for his comparison of these two texts. The alternative approach suggested here is to compare the narrative events themselves as the hermeneutically significant element. Joseph F. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 231–246.

²⁸ The presence of a violent wind (πνοῆς βιᾶς) is also noteworthy. A number of early Jewish texts specify the manner in which the Tower of Babel was destroyed. The earliest account of the manner of its destruction is found in *Jubilees* 10:26 where the structure is felled

Crowds of Jews from all over the Roman Empire—speakers of a multitude of languages—suddenly hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ preached in their own native tongue. “How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language—in our own languages (τῇ ἰδίᾳ διαλέκτῳ) we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:8)? In this narrative the curse of Babel is evangelistically reversed. The separation of human beings through language is overcome—although not through the dissolution of linguistic difference and the imposition of one single tongue.

There is a narrative connection that the author of Luke-Acts is making between Pentecost and Babel. The issue of property held in common, however, has not been seen as an element of the Babel-Pentecost typology. When scholars turn their attention to the assertion that “all who believed were together and had everything in common” (πάντες δὲ οἱ πιστεύοντες ἦσαν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ εἶχον ἅπαντα κοινὰ) (Acts 2:44) other comparisons are made. Conzelmann, for example, claims that:

The picture of sharing property is idealized. The material was furnished by (1) information handed on by tradition (2) knowledge about communistic groups ... whether real or ideal. Idealized communal portraits are associated with utopian dreams or accounts of primeval times. Luke does not present this way of life as a norm for the organization of the church in his own time. It is meant as an illustration of the uniqueness of the ideal earliest days of the movement.²⁹

Fitzmyer, however, is convinced that “Luke has included this description as an ideal that he would desire to be characteristic of all Christians.”³⁰ He fails to provide a rationale, however, for why communal property should be an

by a great wind. The *Sibylline Oracles* (3:24) also speak of the destruction of the tower by wind. Closer to the rabbinic milieu, *Mekhilta de R. Ishmael* (Beshallah 5:85–90) asserts that Babel was brought to nought by wind. In *Acts*, however, the violent wind is a life-granting force which brings about vitality for the new community.

²⁹ Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: a commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel; ed. Eldon Jay Epp with Christopher R. Matthews; Hermenia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 27. For a more recent discussion, see Justin Taylor, “The Community of Goods among the First Christians and Among the Essenes,” in *Historical Perspectives: From the Hasmoneans to Bar Kokhba in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature, 27–31 January, 1999* (STDJ 37; ed. David Goodblatt, et al; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 147–161; G. Thiessen, “Urchristlicher Liebeskommunismus: Zum ‘Sitz im Leben’ des Topos *hapanta koina* in Apg 2,44 und 4,32,” in *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in Their Textual and Situational Contexts: Essays in Honor of Lars Hartman* (ed. T. Fornberg and D. Hellholm; Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1995), 689–712.

³⁰ Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 272.

ideal. Based on the above midrash, it is possible that the ‘common property’ motif found in *Acts*’ presentation of the early history of the church is actually a further reflection on the lifting of the curse of Babel. Just as the Babelites were a unified group who held all things in common before being scattered, the new church has returned to a pre-dispersion state which permits them to communicate the Gospel across linguistic boundaries and to obtain a political and economic unity that had been lost at Babel. This time, however, such unity will not be predicated in rebellion against the divine but in a scattering to all the nations to preach the Gospel through the agency of a violent yet gracious wind.

4. *Sins of the Mouth: The Improper Theology of the Babelites*

A ubiquitous rabbinic hermeneutical move attempts to specify what Scripture leaves vague or unstated. A second collection of midrashim, accordingly, examines the precise nature of the sin of the Babelites. These interpreters seized on the presence of *speech* and *language* in Gen 11 to argue that the sin of Babel was itself a fundamentally linguistic transgression. The people were engaged in either (at best) improper or (at worst) blasphemous speech. In these midrashim the focus shifts from the building of the tower as such to reconstructing the theological presuppositions on which it was founded. The question of God’s justice continues to be present as well.

4.1. *The Sky Is Falling*

Let us begin with the best-case scenario—the people were guilty of improper speech. One tradition, found twice in *Genesis Rabbah* (38.1.2 and 38.6.7), might even allow for a somewhat positive interpretation of the Babelites. Juxtaposing the narrative of Babel with Ps 59:12, the midrash suggests one definition for the sin of Babel. The tower builders were punished for their sinful mouths.³¹ The offense, in this interpretation, is

³¹ ‘Sin of the mouth’ is potentially in contrast with the locus of the sins of the generation of the Flood whose thoughts and motivating impulses, rabbinic readers could argue, were themselves corrupted. Genesis 6:5 claims that, with regard to the generation of the Flood, “every plan devised by their mind was evil all the time.” The important element from a rabbinic perspective would be the claim that *לְבַדּוֹ מִכָּל־יֵצֶר מַחֲשֶׁבֶת לָבוֹ* was only evil, every day. Rabbinic anthropology held that human beings possessed two competing ethical drives: the *עַר הָרַע* or evil inclination and the *עַר הַטוֹב* or good inclination. Urbach holds that “in the Bible, the *yesser* is the natural inclination of man, and also in the teaching of the Tannaim and

not the actual building of the tower, but rather the theological foundation—the motivation—upon which it is built.

אמרו אחת לאלף ותרנו שנה הרקיע מתמוטט אלא בואו ונעשה סמוכות
אחד מהצפון ואחד מהדרום ואחד מהמערב וזה שכאן סומכו מן המזרח

They said: “Once in 1,656 years the firmament shakes. But let us go and make supports—one in the north, one in the south, one in the west and here is its eastern support.” (Gen. Rab. 38.1.2)

Leaving aside the reference to 1,656 years for a moment, the construction of the tower is pictured as an attempt on the part of the people to erect a support for the firmament. Here is a unique element in the history of ancient Jewish interpretations of Babel. How should this imagined speech be understood and what is the precise nature of the sin of the tower builders? The text of *Genesis Rabbah* provides the modern reader of this midrash virtually no narrative context. The parallel version of the midrash found in *Gen. Rab.* 38.6.7 is equally bereft of contextual clues for interpreting the imagined speech of the Babelites. The reader is informed in the later iteration that the rabbinic sages hold the speech to be sinful and that it constitutes harsh words (see below), but with no explanation as to why. Why, in other words, is the desire on the part of the Babelites to build supports for the heavens condemned by the midrashic conscience?

Amoraim it sometimes denotes the power of thought, or serves as a synonym for the heart as the source of human desire” (Urbach, *The Sages: The World and Wisdom of the Rabbis of the Talmud* [3d. ed.; trans. Israel Abrams; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987], 472). There is no sense of duality present, however. God is the ultimate source of both inclinations according to rabbinic literature and each inclination serves its own purpose. *Genesis Rabbah* 9.7 even contains an interpretation which associates the *יצר הרע* with God’s summation that all he had created was “very good” (Gen 1:31). “Nachman in the name of Shmuel—‘very good?’ This is in reference to the *יצר הטוב*; ‘Very good?’ This is in reference to the *יצר הרע*. How can the *יצר הרע* be ‘very good?’ If it were not for the *יצר הרע* a man would not build a house, take a wife, or father children.” A balanced human being, according to this midrash, is one who possesses the proper mixture of these two drives. Reading Gen 6:5 in light of such theological anthropology and given the rabbinic preference to find meaning in every term utilized by Scripture, one interpretation of the generation of the Flood could hold that they were depraved both in their *actual thoughts and endeavors* and in the *very capacity* to think and plan. Moral reasoning itself was corrupted. Before the deluge, humanity was driven entirely by the evil inclination. The Babelites are chastised, in contrast, only for plans they have attempted to actualize. The moral capacities of the Babelites are qualitatively different from those of the generation of the Flood. The punishment is correspondingly different. For a recent treatment of the evil inclination, see Rosen-Zvi, Ishay. *Demonic Desire: “Yetzer Hara” and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity* (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religions; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

The text itself presupposes a traditional biblical cosmology where the firmament (רָקִיעַ) is a dome which separates the waters above from the dry-land below. The reference to the firmament also points back once again to the Flood narrative. After Noah enters the ark “all the fountains of the great deep burst apart and the floodgates of the sky broke open” (Gen 7:11). The same cosmology underscores both the biblical and rabbinic texts. Given their past experience, the generation of the dispersion might reasonably fear future instability with regard to the firmament.³² That such instability is at the center of the tower builders’ thinking is confirmed by the characterization of the tower as a ‘support’ by the midrash. The root cause for the construction of the Tower of Babel would then be fear. This is certainly a motivation encountered previously in the history of interpretation (Josephus and Pseudo-Philo). The firmament has proven unreliable in the past and can be expected to be so again. The issue is not primarily hubris or a desire to be like God, but a natural human inclination to prepare for a perceived catastrophe. The midrash, however, is still very clear that the people’s action and motivation are considered sinful. But what is the nature of their sin? They are *speaking* bad theology. We can surmise that the Babelites are questioning the stability of the created order, and, by implication, the divine power behind the created order. They are guilty of a lack of faith. They do not believe that God has made adequate provisions for creation and are convinced that their assistance is somehow required. From a canonical perspective, they appear not to believe the divine promise delivered in Gen 9:15 never again to flood the world.

The theological presuppositions of the tower builders echo those of a favorite theological foe in much rabbinic literature: the Apikoros (אפיקורוס). This figure is a rabbinized version of the Epicurean philosopher in antiquity; hence the term’s status in rabbinic Hebrew as a loan-word.³³ The Mishnah, in fact, classes the generation of the dispersion and the Epicurean-Apikoros together as an examples of people “who have no share in the world to come” (*m. Sanh* 10:1). Another early rabbinic passage counsels that one should always “know how to give an answer to the Epicurean” (דע מה תשיב)

³² A larger rabbinic tradition actually holds that Noah’s flood was the *second* of its kind (*Gen. Rab.* 23.7.4). There was an earlier flood during the time of Enosh. For a brief discussion of this tradition, see Lieber, “The Poet and the Tower-Builders,” 174, n. 8.

³³ Jastrow, “אפיקורוס,” *Dictionary*, 104. For a discussion of the Epicurean in later Talmudic literature, see Henry A. Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy: A Study of Epicurea and Rhetorica in Early Midrashic Writings* (StPB 21; Leiden: Brill, 1973).

לאפיקורוס) (*m. Avot* 2:14). Given the fact that no other philosophical school from the Greco-Roman world is mentioned in the vast corpus of rabbinic literature, it should be clear that members of the rabbinic class viewed the Epicureans as espousing an especially dangerous philosophy. One of the chief faults of Epicureanism, according to rabbinic views of the philosophical system (which may or may not correspond to the actual teachings of historical Epicureans), is the denial that God has made proper provision for the world.³⁴ “According to the philosophical system of Epicurus,” writes E.E. Urbach, “the gods are indifferent to all that happens in the world. They are not active, but abide in absolute tranquility.”³⁵ A fuller (although not un-biased) description of the ‘evils’ of Epicureanism is preserved by Josephus.

And learn from these facts how mistaken are the Epicureans, who exclude Providence from human life and refuse to believe that God governs its affairs or that the universe is directed by a blessed and immortal being to the end that the whole of it may endure, but say that the world runs by its own movement without knowing a guide or another's care. (*A.J.* 10. 278)

Reading *Genesis Rabbah* in light of Josephus' description of Epicureanism, a number of comparisons can be made. The tower builders are pictured as proto-Epicureans. They are the rabbinic Apikoros writ large. While they do not explicitly deny the existence of God, their conviction that the firmament requires supports calls into question the providential care of the deity. They refuse to believe that the “universe is directed by a blessed being ... to the end that the whole of its may endure.” Another impending disaster is anticipated. Even the curious reference to a Babelian belief that the firmament totters every 1,656 years may point towards a conviction that the “world runs by its own movements.” However, here the Babelites' logical is clearly faulty. The number 1,656 is, according to biblical chronology, the

³⁴ For a brief overview of Epicureanism at the turn of the Common Era, see M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Howard Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1989); more directly related to early Judaism and Christianity, see Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (2d. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 348–356. Most important for our discussion of the rabbinic version of the Epicurean is the claim that “Epicurus ... did believe in the gods, who are made of refined atoms. But the gods never interfere in nature or the affairs of humans. Their existence is something of a paradox, for they have no pragmatic function and do not explain anything in Epicurus' system. A most important consequence of his views, on which he insists is that there is no providence” (Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 351).

³⁵ Urbach, *The Sages*, 24.

time-span between the Creation of the world and the deluge.³⁶ The Babelites are foolishly attempting to deduce a pattern from a one-time event.

The Tower of Babel, moreover, is only one of four proposed supports (סמכות) which the people are planning to build. A larger imagined project on the part of the tower builders is conceivably a reflection of the divine assertion contained in the biblical text that the tower is only the beginning of the people's work (Gen 11:5). They have three other projects in mind. The tower is not presented, according to this midrash, as a structure meant to assault the heavenly realm or attack the deity who dwells there. It is certainly too much to claim that the midrash offers a positive account of the Babelites—they are classed with the reviled Epicureans and their actions are referred to as “sin of the mouth”—but the type of transgression in which they are involved is quite different from those imagined by other ancient Jewish accounts. The sin of Babel is not hubris, but heresy. In this connection, “heresy is not the negation of God's existence, but the denial of his providence.”³⁷

Returning to the comparison with the generation of the Flood, I would argue that the mediating presence of fear may even dampen the focus on sin. The object of the Babelites fear, however, is not necessarily the deity. They appear to be making a rational and empirical calculation about how the cosmos functions and planning accordingly.³⁸ The theological proposition to be drawn from this is that God takes intention (even flawed intention) into account when dispensing justice. The transgression at Babel is clearly less than that attributed to the contemporaries of Noah; even the very intention of the thoughts of the later was said to be totally evil. The generation of the dispersion may have no share in the world-to-come, but their punishment in the-present-world is certainly less.

³⁶ The number 1,656 is arrived at by combining the paternal age at birth of the first son from Adam to Lamech in Gen 5:3–28 and adding the information that Noah was 600 years old (Gen 7:6) when the flood began. The calculations are as follows: Adam, 130; Seth, 105; Enosh, 90; Kenan, 70; Mahalalel, 65; Jared, 162; Enoch, 65; Methusela, 187; Lamech, 182; Noah at age 600. The equation would be: $130 + 105 + 90 + 70 + 65 + 162 + 65 + 187 + 182 + 600 = 1,656$. See C. Uehlinger, *Weltreich und “Eine Rede”: Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerzählung (Gen 11, 1–9)* (OBO 101; Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 69, n. 136.

³⁷ Urbach, *The Sages*, 31.

³⁸ A central goal of Epicurean philosophy was, in fact, to remove the fear of the gods from humanity. “While the Greeks believed in gods that interfered capriciously in human affairs, Epicurus believed that there are no gods who scare you” (Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 351).

4.2. *Harsh Words*

Sinful speech takes center stage in another midrash. An element of rabbinic hermeneutics already encountered might be termed the principle of the non-superfluous nature of Scriptural language.³⁹ The theological rationale for this hermeneutical principle is that the Torah—as divine speech—has absolutely no need to repeat itself. Every word or turn-of-phrase used in the Torah has unique signifying power. Genesis 11:1 calls this criterion to task. Why, one could ask, does the Torah state that the people possessed one language *and* few words? Is Scripture repeating itself? One suggestion was that the phrases *שָׁפָה אֶחָת* and *וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים* do not, in fact, refer to the same thing at all. The pair *שָׁפָה אֶחָת* is sufficient to point towards monolingualism at Babel. One way to elide this redundancy is to reformulate or re-signify the later phrase, *וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים*. The present midrash accomplishes this by means of an appeal to the semantic range of a variant of the term *אֶחָד*. The Hebrew term *אֶחָד* is synonymous with the term *יָחַד*. The later term, however, can mean either *one* or *sharp*.⁴⁰ This play on words is parleyed into a new charge against the builders of the tower. They are guilty of *another* kind of sinful speech: Slander.

ר יוחנן אמר וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים שאמרו דברים חדים על
 יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ יי אֶחָד ועל אֶחָד הָיָה אַבְרָהָם
 אמרו אברהם זה פרדה עקרה הוא אינו מוליד
 ועל יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ אמרו לא כל הימנו לבר לו את העליונים
 ולתן לנו את התחתונים

Rabbi Yohanan said: Few words? (No.) For they spoke sharp (i.e. slanderous) words against “The LORD our God, the LORD is One” (Deut 6:4) and against “Abraham is One” (Ezek 33:24). They said: “This Abraham is an impotent mule, he will never produce offspring.” And against the LORD our God they said: “It is not up to him to select the heavenly portions for himself and to give us the lower realm.” (Gen. Rab. 38.6.2)

The midrash continues with a tradition that the people sought to place an idol on the summit of the tower to wage war against God. There are a number of interesting elements to note concerning this passage. Before exploring what this text says, it is worth examining *how* the text makes its

³⁹ Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 11–13; For an analysis of this principle, see Alexander Samely, “Scripture’s Implicature: The Midrashic Assumptions of Consistency and Relevance,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 37 (1992): 173–174; James Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 18–23.

⁴⁰ Kohler and Baumgartner, “יָחַד,” *HALOT* 1:291.

arguments. The first step is to assert that **אֵלֹהִים** possesses the same semantic elasticity as its synonym. R. Yohanan is thus able to assert that, since the Torah does not repeat itself, the second phrase of Gen 11:1 must point to something besides linguistic unity. It does not speak of the use of a singular language by the Babelites, but rather points to the nature and content of what the people were saying. The Babelites are speaking hard, biting, slanderous words. Against whom were they speaking? Yohanan highlights two possibilities—God and Abraham. This identification is facilitated by an appeal to two biblical texts—Deut 6:4 and Ezek 33:24—both of which make use of the Hebrew term **אֵלֹהִים** to describe God and Abraham respectively.⁴¹ Here, now, **אֵלֹהִים** must be taken again in the sense of one or singular.

The tower builders are speaking only one language and what they are speaking is against the unity and uniqueness which Scripture attributes to God and to Abraham. The Babelites are engaged in both blasphemous and slanderous speech. It is also possible that, in claiming that the Babelites were speaking against more than one person, the midrash is attempting to deal with the grammatically paradoxical plurality of the term *one*. They were speaking against two who were each singular. Scripture, therefore, used a plural form for the term *one*.⁴²

Turning next to the question of the specific *content* of the people's speech: What exactly do the people say against God and Abraham? The Babelites are angry that God has chosen for himself the heavens and forced upon them a terrestrial existence. This anger serves as the justification for their building endeavor. I will examine this sinful speech concerning the divine below.

⁴¹ The rabbinic hermeneutical rule is that of *gezerah shava* (equal measure). "Strictly speaking this is only to be used if two given Torah statements make use of identical (and possibly unique) expressions" (Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 18); see also, Azzan Yadin, *Scripture as Logos: Rabbi Ishmael and the Origins of Midrash* (Divination: Rereading Late Antique Religion; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 82–83; Rivka Kern-Ulmer, "Hermeneutics, Techniques of Rabbinic Exegesis," in *Encyclopedia of Midrash*, 274–275. The *gezerah shavah* originated in halakhic contexts as a means to resolve debates concerning the application of Torah law. The limits of its halakhic usage and its transfer to the realm of aggadic texts (as is the case here) were always disputed in early rabbinic works. In a legal context, the term held in common by two biblical texts had to be free or **מופנה** in order for the principle to apply. The superfluous nature of a term was viewed as divine testimony that the hermeneutical operation was, in fact, intended—encoded in the very words of Scripture. (It also prevented, theoretically, the random correlation of any two texts in the entirety of the Hebrew Bible.) The Hebrew term **אֵלֹהִים** is hardly unique. A rabbinic reader *could argue*, however, that the larger phrase in which it occurs is *superfluous* in Gen 11:1.

⁴² Thanks to Dr. William K. Gilders for this suggestion, personal communication.

The charge against Abraham, however, is interesting with regard to how the midrash imagines the generation of the dispersion in its relationship to Israel. Abraham is equated with a barren mule which, by definition, can never produce offspring. This particular canard deserves attention. As stated above, the category of speech here is best characterized as slander or לשון הרע. At least one rabbinic source, moreover, considers slander as the worst possible offense.

For what things is a man punished in this world, while the fundamental retribution is kept in store for him in the world to come? For idolatry, murder, and also for slander, which is equal to all of them put together (ועל לשון הרע כנגד כולם).⁴³ (t. *Pe'ah* 1:2)

R. Yose b. R. Zimra claims that “if a man tells slanderous tales, it is as though he denied the root (*b. Arak.* 15b).”⁴⁴ The midrash presupposes an underlying conflict between Abraham and the Babelites but provides only the barest outline. Like the author of Pseudo-Philo, the midrashist creates narrative continuity between the story of the Tower of Babel and the Abraham cycle in the book of Genesis so that the sin of Babel is ultimately a sin both against God *and* against the people of Israel. The present midrash creates a new narrative in which the sin of Babel was the slanderous mocking of Abraham and his patience in waiting for God to make a name for himself and his descendants. Abraham’s apparent lack of fecundity is derided by the Babelites who set about building their own city and tower in an attempt to make a name for themselves. The irony is clear. It is the barren mule Abraham who will actually be the recipient of a name and offspring.

4.3. *The Blasphemous Babelites*

As the above midrash demonstrates, the tower builders’ sinful speech is also classified as blasphemy. They speak not only against Abraham, but also God. One exegetical approach is to construct a parabolic narrative. David Stern has highlighted both the narrative and exegetical features of the rabbinic parable (משל).⁴⁵ “Parables ... operate surreptitiously as literary forms,”

⁴³ Cited in Urbach, *The Sages*, 355.

⁴⁴ Urbach, *The Sages*, 28. “One who denies the root” is a rabbinic phrase for those who, like the Apikoros, are functional atheists. By their deeds and actions they demonstrate a lack of respect for the divine.

⁴⁵ David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); in addition, see David Stern, *Midrash and Theology*, 39–54.

claims Stern “expressing allusive messages through indirect means.”⁴⁶ These meshalim (pl. of mashal) serve an exegetical function which is not always clear and certain. Stern points to the paradoxical effectiveness of the deployment of the mashal:

The mashal's effectiveness in persuading its audience of the truth of its message lies in its refusing to state that message explicitly, thereby making the audience deduce it for themselves.⁴⁷

In some circumstances the meaning of a mashal—in its exegetical context—is quite clear. In other cases, it is less so. In the following midrash the exegesis is not based on the explication of a particular term or phrase from the biblical narrative; rather, the interpretation is produced by juxtaposing two biblical narratives and attempting to determine what makes the two accounts different. The presupposition, of course, is that the two narratives appear similar.

אמר ר לעזר: אי זו קשה זה שאמר למלך או אני או את בפלטין
או זה שאמר לא אני ולא את בפלטין זה שהוא אמר או אני או את
כך דור המבול אמרו מה שדי פי נעבדנו
דור הפלגה אמרו לא כל הימנו לבור לו את העיליונים
וליתן לנו את התחתונים
אלא בוא נעשה לנו מגדל וניתן עבודה זרה בראשו וניתן חרב
בידה נתהי נראת כאילו עושה עימו מלחמה
מהן לא נשארה פליטה ואלו נשארה מהם פליטה

R. Elezar said: “Which (case) is more severe? One says to a king: ‘Either you or I (will live) in the palace’ or the one who says ‘Neither you, nor I will (live) in the palace’? It is the one who says, ‘Either you or I (will live in the palace).’ Thus the generation of the Flood said: “Who is Shaddai that we should serve him” (Job 21:15). The generation of the dispersion said: “It’s not up to Him to select the heavens for himself and to give us the lower realm. But let us go and make a tower for ourselves and we will put an idol on its summit and we will place a sword in the idol’s hand so as to give the impression that it is waging war against God.” Among them (the generation of the Flood), no remnant remained, but from them (the generation of the dispersion), a remnant did remain.
(*Gen. Rab.* 38.6.5)

The focus of this midrash is not on the relative righteousness of the tower builders, but rather on their *relative wickedness*. In this case, the actions of the respective generations are irrelevant. It is the internal, theological dispositions towards the divine that are the determining factor in calculating

⁴⁶ Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

divine chastisement. The very basis for comparison in this parable is not the actual actions of the two generations, but rather the *underlying theological implications* of the sinful behavior. Noah's contemporaries were guilty of giving the divine an ultimatum as they sought to take over the abode of God. They believed that they could take the place of God and sit upon the very throne of the deity. The proof for the theological folly of the generation of the Flood is not drawn from the text of Genesis. Rather, the scriptural evidence is again taken from Job. The people question the very foundation of devotion to the divine in their assertion: "Who is Shaddai that we should serve him?" The Joban passage continues with the following question, which may be equally suggestive for the meaning of mashal: "What is the use in praying to him?" In essence, the people adopt a thoroughly agnostic or dismissive approach. They hold the divine in no high regard and see no reason to continue serving him. In rejecting God, they elevate themselves to a position of imminence: either you or I! They consider themselves to be on the same level with the divine.

How is the sin of the tower builders different? Are they not equally culpable of rebellion? The text even includes the tradition that the builders placed an idol on top of their construction to wage war with the divine?⁴⁸ How is

⁴⁸ One of the most damning, and ubiquitous, assertions made by some early Jewish interpreters was that the Babelites were not only rebellious but that they also were engaged in idolatry. The charge of idolatry is intriguing because, at least on the surface, there is absolutely no textual evidence for this interpretive tradition in the biblical text. In many interpretive texts, the charge of idolatry appears to be a foregone conclusion in search of an exegetical foundation. The warmongering of the tower builders is often given concrete form in the presence of the idol. It is quite often the case, moreover, that the idol is not an object of worship *as such*, but a vanguard in the Babelites' fight against the deity. This is one of the few locations in *Genesis Rabbah* where the claim that the Babelites engaged in idolatry is explicit. *Genesis Rabbah* 38.8.5 is the other example of idolatry-at-Babel. In the later case, the people's desire to make a name for themselves is equated with the production of an idol. A key figure we have already encountered above in Chapter Four is R. Ishmael, who transmits an early tannaitic tradition stating that, in wishing to make a name for themselves, the people were actually engaged in idolatry. "A name is nothing other than idolatry" (אין שם אלא עבודת כוכבים). The word שם is read as an encoded term for idol worship. Unfortunately, Ishmael does not provide us with his logic. A tradition preserved in the Babylonian Talmud attempts to offer some insight:

Rabbi Nathan said: All of them had resolved to engage in idolatry. For it says here: "Let us make a name for ourselves" and it says there "you shall not mention the name of other gods" (Exod 23:13). Just as there (in Exodus) the passage is referring to idolatry, so also here the passage is referring to idolatry (*b. Sanh 109a*).

R. Nathan appeals to a passage from Exod 23:13 in which God forbids the people of Israel from even making mention of the names of other deities. The passage in full reads: "Be on guard concerning all that I have told you. Make no mention of the names of other gods; they

this possibly *less* severe? The implication is that the Babelites, in their very rebellion, showed a modicum of respect for the power of God. They recognized his power to threaten them and responded. They may have questioned the choices that the divine made in his ordering of the cosmos, but they took the power of God very seriously. In their disgruntled articulation they admit (at least tacitly) that they have no hope of actually attaining to the heavenly heights. “Neither you, nor I” remains an assault against the sovereignty of God, but, in contrast to the generation of the Flood, the Babelites do not take the extra theological step of believing themselves capable of residing in the heavens. They may have been blasphemers, but they were not guilty of self-deification. Unlike the generation of the Flood, they were not dismissive of the divine and his power. In the rabbinic theological system, questioning God’s power is apparently a more serious infraction than questioning God’s exercise of those powers. The difference is marked by dramatically divergent divine responses. Because of their relative wickedness, the generation of the dispersion is not totally exterminated. A remnant remains.

What is most interesting about this midrash is its exegetical counter-intuitiveness. The generation of the Flood is represented in parabolic form as attempting to storm the heavens (*either* you or I), while the tower builders are not presented in such a light. According to the logic of the parable, the Babelites are mainly concerned that they have been relegated to the lower realms while the divine has chosen the better portion. They do not attempt, however, to overtake the heavens. The ubiquity of the image of *storming the heavens* in other interpretive texts makes this midrash’s assertion especially noteworthy.

4.4. *Out of Their Mind*

We began our overview of the theological speech of the Babelites with a focus on their misguided, but understandable concern about God’s provision for the world. Slandering speech against Abraham and blasphemous words against God have also been explored. This section concludes with a text which pictures the Babelites as depraved in both their actions and their moral capacities. While the focus is still on something spoken by the Babelites, their actual ‘speech’ has become almost irrelevant to their

shall not be heard on your lips.” Just as the context of ‘name’ is considered to be idolatrous in the passage from Exodus, so also is the people’s proposal to make a name for themselves considered an entry into the realm of idolatry. The term נִשְׁבַּח in Gen 11 is treated by R. Nathan as a synecdoche. ‘Name’ really means ‘name of other gods.’

moral estimation. This tradition concerning the Babelites centers around the translation of a geographical marker in the biblical text into commentary on the theological disposition of the builders *prior* to the construction of the tower. The interpretation is predicated on a translation of the claim that the Babelites were “journeying from the East” (בְּנִסְעָם מִקֶּדֶם). The verb נסע denotes some form of movement in both classical and rabbinic Hebrew.⁴⁹ What type of movement it was is determined by R. Eleazar b. R. Simeon who reads the term in the *hiphil* as “removed.”

הסיעו עצמן מקדמונו של עולם אמרו אי אפשינו לא בו ולא באלהותו

They removed themselves from the ancient one of the world. They said:
“We have no desire for Him or His divinity.” (*Gen. Rab.* 38.6.1)

A further step in R. Eleazar’s interpretive process is to read קֶדֶם in the sense of ‘first’ or ‘preeminent’—and thus as a reference to the divine—rather than as a marker on a compass. One possible hermeneutical assumption, although it is certainly unstated here, is that mere geography can not be the only intent of the biblical text.⁵⁰ Certainly something more must be communicated than the pre-building itinerary of the Babelites. For R. Eleazar, the biblical text means to point to a deeper truth, a greater understanding, of the very nature of the builders of the tower. Even before they begin to plan with one another, they have already abandoned the deity and his counsel. The construction of the tower is only the physical manifestation of this inner spiritual disposition.

5. *Two Years after the Flood: The Babelites as Icons of Incurability*

A third collection of midrashim portray the Babelites as icons. They are, variably, biblical images of absolute disobedience, embodiments of foolishness and examples of gross ungratefulness. The transgression of the tower builders is correspondingly magnified and the justice and purposes of God upheld. At the same time, the actual motivations for building the tower, important in the previous section, are immaterial within these midrashim.

⁴⁹ Kohler and Baumgartner, “נָסַע,” *HALOT* 1:704; Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 918.

⁵⁰ The hermeneutical theory is that of ‘relevancy.’ See Samely, “Scripture’s Implicature,” 167–179. A different approach to the same question of relevancy is offered by *Targum Onqelos*, which translates the Hebrew קֶדֶם into the Aramaic בְּקִדְמִיתָא (in the past). For the translator of Onqelos, the term concerns the chronology of events, not the geography; see also, Lieber, “The Poet and the Tower-Builders,” 176–177.

The purpose of these readings of Babel is to square the punishment of the Babelites with the nature of God and his relationship with Israel and with humanity as a whole. In the process the question of moral agency and divine response is raised.

5.1. *Lest My People Forget*

Genesis Rabbah 36.1.2 preserves a midrash which juxtaposes the account of Babel with a passage from Ps 59:12–13. The verses read as follows:

אל תהרגם פן ישכחו עמי הניעמו בחילך והו רידמו
מגנגנו אדני חטאת-פימו דבר-שפתימו
וילכדו בגאון גם ומאלה ומכחש יספרו

Do not kill them lest my people forget; with your power make wanderers of them; bring them low, O our Shield, the Lord, because of the sin of their mouths, the words on their lips. Let them be trapped by their pride, and by the imprecations and lies they utter.

The midrash offers two specific examples from biblical history to which the psalm might plausibly be pointing (the first is the account of Doeg and Ahitophel in 2 Sam 16:21). The relevant portion of the midrash reads:

ר לעזר בשם ר יוסי בן זימרא פתר קריא בדור הפלגה
אמרו ישראל אל תהרגם דור הפלגה פן ישכחו עמי
פן ישכחו הדורות הבאים אחריהם הניעמו בחילך טלטלמו
[והורידמו] והורידמו מלמעלה למטה ולנו יעשה
מגנגנו יי חטאת-פימו מחיטייה שהוציאו מפיהם דבר-שפתימו
אמרו

R. Eleazar in the name of R. Yose b. Zimra interpreted the verse to speak of the generation of the dispersion: The Israelites said, ‘*Do not kill*’ the generation of the dispersion. ‘*Lest my people forget*,’ lest the generations coming after them forget. ‘*Make them wander to and fro by your power*’ Throw them out. ‘*And bring them down*’ from above to below. But as to us: ‘*Our Lord and our shield*.’ ‘*For the sin of their mouth*’: For the sin which they uttered with their mouth and the ‘*word of their lips*’ They said ...⁵¹ (*Gen. Rab.* 38.1.2)

The association of this particular verse from the Psalter with the tower builders is not exegetically difficult; it is intuitively quiet simple. The larger context of this passage is rich with resonances to the account of Babel. The unidentified people are to be wanderers who are cast down (implying on

⁵¹ The text of the midrash continues here with the tower-as-support midrash discussed above.

a literal reading that the people were previously ‘up’⁵²); they are speaking sinfully with both their mouths and their lips (a key term in Gen 11:1); the psalmist hopes they will be trapped by a vice traditionally associated with Babel, pride.⁵³

A number of comments are in order. First, the midrashic juxtaposition of the two passages implicitly creates a new narrative not present in either Genesis or Psalms. In this narrative, it is the Israelites, as opposed to a surrogate such as Abraham, who respond to the Babelites’ affront to the divine and actually serve as a restraining force against divine justice. Past is present and present is past. Such a reading is in keeping with an assertion found in *Midrash Tehillim* that “whatever David says in his Psalms refers to himself, to all Israel, and to all times.”⁵⁴

A second aspect deals, once again, with the aftermath of the tower narrative. Why is the generation of the dispersion not ultimately destroyed as was the generation of the Flood? The Babelites are to serve as an *object-lesson* for later generations who might be tempted to disobey God. It is unclear whether the midrash refers to later generations of Israelites or later generations of humanity. The reference to “lest *my people* forget” should probably incline the reader towards the former option. Regardless, the Babelites are presented as an icon of disobedience. The very fact that the Psalmist implores God not to kill an unspecified group of people leads to the logical conclusion that the group was culpable of such a crime that death was certainly deserved. The divine reprieve is requested—not for the sake of the Babelites—but so that the group might serve as a warning to others. The

⁵² For an example of this type of hyper-literal reading of Scriptural language in rabbinic literature, see Kugel’s discussion of the story of Jacob’s Ladder. Genesis 28:12 claims that Jacob saw the angels of God “ascending and descending” in a nocturnal vision. Kugel argues that a midrashic tradition (*Gen. Rab.* 68:12) has its origin in the logical consequences of Scripture placing the word ascend before descend. “Since angels are normally located in heaven, one would expect them first to have gone *down*, and only subsequently *up*. If the biblical passage maintains the opposite, it seems to ancient interpreters a reasonable inference that the particular angels in question must already have been on earth” (J. Kugel, *The Ladder of Jacob: Ancient Interpretations of the Story of Jacob and His Children* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006], 12).

⁵³ It is even conceivable that the term *ṣāḥ* is seen as a connection between Ps 59 and Gen 11; although the midrash is not explicit in this regard.

⁵⁴ William G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (Yale Judaica Series 13; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 110; E.M. Menn stresses that, according to rabbinic hermeneutics, David’s psalms provide detail concerning “the formative past” (Esther M. Menn, “Sweet Singer of Israel: David and the Psalms in Early Judaism,” in *Psalms in Community: Jewish and Christian Textual, Liturgical, and Artistic Traditions* [ed. Harold W. Attridge and Margot E. Fassler; Symposium 25; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003], 73).

Babelites *ought* to pay the ultimate price for their sins, but they are spared to serve as a warning to others. This interpretation raises the very intriguing question of historical referents within the framework of midrashic interpretation. The story of Babel could have served as an object-lesson within the narrative world of the Hebrew Bible even if the builders had been destroyed rather than dispersed. The midrash seems to claim that the point of the divine stay was to populate the real world—and not only the narrative world—with living and breathing reminders of the cost and consequences of disobedience. Multilingualism itself becomes the mark of Babel which highlights the risks of rebellion against God.

Moving towards the interpretive approach advocated by Neusner, one could take the fifth-century context in which this midrash was redacted with a great deal of seriousness and argue that the midrash provides a rationale and justification for Israel's contemporary position with regard to the nations of the world. Israel's place among the nations is not an accident of history but an opportunity for the Israelites to be reminded by those nations around them of the costs of sin and rebellion. Such a reading is even more compelling given that St. Augustine, a near contemporary of the redactors responsible for *Genesis Rabbah*, argues a similar case. He even turns to the identical passage in his commentary on the Psalms and applies the verses to the Jewish communities of his day.

This indeed may be also understood of the Jews. Why of the Jews, "Slay not them, lest sometime they forget Thy law"? Those very enemies of mine, that have slain me, do not Thou slay. Let the nation of the Jews remain: certes conquered it hath been by the Romans, certes effaced is the city of them, Jews are not admitted into their city, and yet Jews there are. For all those provinces by the Romans have been subjugated. Who now can distinguish the nations in the Roman Empire the one from the other, inasmuch as all have become Romans and all are called Romans? The Jews nevertheless remain with a mark; nor in such sort conquered have they been, as that by the conquerors they have been swallowed up. Not without reason is there that Cain, on whom, when he had slain his brother, God set a mark in order that no one should slay him. This is the mark which the Jews have ... Why so? In order that He may show to us among our enemies His mercy. "My God hath shown to me in mine enemies." He showeth His mercy to the wild-live grafted on branches that have been cut off because of pride. Behold where they lie, that were proud, behold where thou hast been grafted, that didst lie: and be not thou proud, lest thou shouldest deserve to be cut off.⁵⁵ (Commentary on Psalm 59:18)

⁵⁵ Augustine. *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*. Part 3, Volume 17 (trans. Edmund Hill; Brooklyn, N.Y.: New City Press, 1990–1995), 412–413.

For Augustine, recalcitrant Jewish communities served a larger function in the unfolding of Christian history.⁵⁶ Israel exists for one simple reason: so that “by it remaining the number of Christians might increase.” The midrashic deployment of the same verse reverses the image. It is the plurality of the nations themselves—*not Israel*—that serves as message and warning.

5.2. *Incorrigible Babelites*

The question of a *sign of disobedience* as prophylactic against future human misbehavior raises another problem, however. One could argue that the leniency shown to the Babelites is presented as a direct response on the part of God to the failure of human beings to learn his previous lessons. The generation of the Flood was entirely wiped out with the exception of the sons of Noah. This extreme response to the problem of human rebellion and sin had unanticipated consequences. Did the divine not provide any sign of the costs of rebellion for the postdiluvian generation? The absolute devastation of the Flood should have served as such a sign. A number midrashim assert that the Babelites, therefore, should have had no need of such a reminder of the consequences of disobedience. In fact, the culpability of the Babelites is actually increased when these midrashim place the generation of the Flood and the generation of the dispersion in close theological and chronological association.

Such a move is accomplished through the collapsing of narrative space by reference to a genealogical notice *following* the account of Babel that “Shem gave birth to Arpachshad two years after the Flood (שֵׁם יָלַד אֶת־אַרְפַּכְשָׁד שְׁנָתַיִם אַחֲרֵי הַמָּבּוּל)” (Gen 11:10). How do three Hebrew words demonstrate the chronological proximity of the two sinful generations? Arpachshad is the first member of the postdiluvian generation—a generation which many ancient Jewish interpreters equate with the generation of the dispersion. A second interpretive move is to draw a clue from a comparable genealogy in Gen 10:21–31. This genealogical strain claims explicitly that Peleg, already encountered in

⁵⁶ For a discussion of Augustine’s exegesis of the Psalter in the context of his larger oeuvre, see David F. Wright, “Augustine: His Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. I: Antiquity* (ed. by Magne Sæbø; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 710–714. A more general introduction to Augustinian biblical interpretation can be found in Anne-Marie La Bonnadière, ed. *Saint Augustine and the Bible* (ed. and trans. Pamela Bright; The Bible Through the Ages 2; Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).

our previous discussion, is the great-grandson of Arpachshad and was so named because “in his days the earth was divided” (בִּימֵיו נִפְלְגָה הָאָרֶץ) (Gen 10:25). The following argument can be made by drawing on both genealogies and attempting to harmonize them. I would stress that these are all *unstated assumptions* in the midrashim in question. The planning and construction of the Tower of Babel must have taken place during Peleg’s lifetime in order for his name to have any etymological significance. His name, in fact, means division. One could argue, moreover, that Peleg’s name would have been given at his birth as a reflection of contemporary events. This is precisely what we saw Peleg doing in the narration of Babel in the book of *Jubilees* with regard to his son Reu. R. Yose, elsewhere in *Genesis Rabbah*, confirms such an approach. In connection with the mention of Peleg in Gen 10:25, he states that “since the ancients knew their ancestry full well, they would give names in accord with events of some kind” (*Gen. Rab.* 37.7.2). If Peleg was named according to this logic to reflect the division of humanity at Babel, the chronological space between Flood and dispersion would be significantly shortened. One can calculate that, based on Gen 11:10–17, Peleg would have been born 101 years after Shem stepped off the ark, at the earliest.⁵⁷ We are told that Arpachshad lived a total of 460 years and Gen 11:11 informs us that Shem lived half-a-millennium after the Flood. In such a context, a century hardly appears to be an enormous amount of time. Given other interpretive traditions that the Tower of Babel was a large, on-going project for many years (*Jub* 10:23), it is difficult to avoid the impression that construction on the tower began shortly after the flood waters subsided. All of this is hidden behind the citation of the phrase “two years after the Flood.”

The close association of the generation of the Flood with those who first stepped off the ark serves a variety of theological purposes, however. The connection makes the sin of Babel even more reprehensible for some rabbinic readers, but it also makes further punishment counterproductive. A proem attributed to R. Abba b. Kahana utilizes a passage from the book of Proverbs to portray the Babelites as fools and, in so doing, underscores the futility of continued divine chastisement.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Arpachshad is born two years after the Flood. He is 35 years when his son Shelah is born (Gen 11:12); Shelah is 30 at the birth of his son Eber (Gen 11:16); Eber is 34 when Peleg is born (Gen 11:16). The total of the ages of the fathers plus the two years mentioned in Gen 11:10 is 101.

⁵⁸ The rabbinic proem is more commonly known as the *petihah* (from the term פֶּתִיחַ). It is widely used in midrashic texts. Strack and Stemberger define it thusly: “The Petihah is

ר אבא בר כהנא פתח אם תכתוש את האויל במכתש בתוך הריפות
 בעלי לא תסור מעליו אולתו אמר ר אבא בר כהנא
 כזה שהוא כותש את השעורים במלבן סבור שהוא מביא לידי מוטב
 ועד הוא סלק ועד הוא נחת לא תסור מעליו אולתו
 כך דור המבול ודור הפלגה שנתים אחר המבול
 ויהי כל הארץ

R. Abba bar Kahana opened: “Even if you crush a fool in a mortar in the midst of the grain with a pestle you will not turn his foolishness from upon him” (Prov 27:22). R. Abba bar Kahana said: “The one who thinks he can improve a fool is just like one who crushes out barely in a mould. Just as the pestle goes up and comes down, yet you will not turn his foolishness from upon him.” Thus the generation of the Flood and the generation of the dispersion (were only separated by) two years. (Gen 11:10) “And it was all the earth ...”

(Gen. Rab. 38:2)

R. Abba is pointing to a divine realization that *these people* were incorrigible. There is nothing further to be gained from their destruction. A fool will not take correction. What is interesting, although not unusual for midrash, is that the comparison is an anthropomorphic one. God is compared to someone who is engaged with mill-work. A human being who continued to engage in activity which was bound to failure would be looked upon with bemusement at best. What of God? The punishment of God, also, must have some logical limit. The decision not to destroy the tower builders—the divine reprieve of the Babelites which I suggested was a theological problem to some rabbis—does not reflect positively on the tower builders, it is not an act of divine mercy or an attempt to leave a reminder to later Israel, but simple divine resignation in regard to the *moral reality* of the creatures God has created. There is a pessimistic theological anthropology underlying the present midrash. By juxtaposing a passage from Proverbs with the account of the Tower of Babel, R. Abba also draws upon a deep resonance found through the book of Proverbs and within Wisdom literature in general. The *topos* of ‘the fool’ is brought to bear on the generation of the dispersion. Gone now is any sympathy for the Babelites and their desire for unity. Gone is any attempt to understand or speculate on the nature or rationale for their sin. In

probably the most common form of midrashic literature. W. Bacher counted almost 1,400 instances in the texts he had available; there are in fact many more examples. The basic structure is in three parts: a Petihah verse, usually not from the biblical book (or groups of books) from which the reading is taken, but mostly from the ‘Writings’; the preacher expounds the verse so as to lead up to the concluding verse of the reading” (Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 244); see also, M. Hirshman, “The Preacher and His Public in Third-Century Palestine,” *JJS* 42 (1991): 108–114.

point of fact, all interest in the nature of their sin evaporates as the Babelites are presented simply as one more example of a biblical *type*. The question of God's justice is addressed by portraying God as embodying the disciplinary logic reflected in Scripture itself. Justice itself is thereby redefined by reading the account of Babel in light of Proverbs. Divine justice, according to this reading, is consistent *even if* the generation of the dispersion was no better than the generations which preceded them.

A similar chronological point is made in a midrash attributed to R. Yehudah b. Rabbi. The theological assertion present in this midrash is different, however. The proem here, opens with a reference to Isa. 44:18.

יהודה בר רבי פתח לא ידעו ולא יבינו כי טח מראות עיניהם מהשכיל לבתם
הדא הוא דכתיב הנפלים היו בארץ בימים ההם וגם אחרי כן
יהודה בר רבי אומר לא הוה להון למילף מן קמאי אתמהא
דור המבול מדור אנוש דור הפלגה מדור למבול דכתיב אחר המבול

Yehuda b. Rabbi opened: "They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are smeared from seeing, and their hearts from comprehending" (Isa 44:18). Thus it is written: "The Nephillim were in the land in those days and also after that" (Gen 6:4). Yehuda b. Rabbi said: "They didn't learn from those who went before them? Very strange! The generation of the Flood (should have learned its lesson) from the generation of Enosh and the generation of the dispersion (should have learned its lesson) from the generation of the Flood. Thus it is written: "two years after the flood." (*Gen. Rab.* 38.4)

The censure of the Babelites continues and intensifies in this midrash as Yehudah b. Rabbi is baffled at the denseness of the generation of the dispersion. The failure of the Babelites to learn their lesson, however, is only another chapter in the failure of humanity as a whole. The exegetically important element is the conclusion of the quotation from Gen 6:4. A plain or literal meaning of the verse would suggest that the phrase **אחרי כן** points simply to the presence of the mythical Nephilim during the period preceding the Flood. They are "in the land in those days and afterwards." The conclusion of the phrase, from a rabbinic perspective of Scriptural non-superfluous-ness, is an invitation to read the passage in another way. The Hebrew term **אחר** is treated as a term which links together two stories from the Primeval History. It is a marker in the text that one generation should have learned from another, but did not because *after that* ... the next story in the cycle of disobedience appears. The generation of the Flood engages in reprobate behavior *after* the time of Enosh and the appearance of the Nephilim; they should have known better. The generation of the dispersion, in a similar fashion, had ample warnings to turn away from rebellion.

A second important element to highlight in this midrash is the function of Scriptural citation. There is hermeneutical significance to the selection of the text from Isaiah to provide depth to the narrative of Babel. Daniel Boyarin has explored in great detail the role biblical citation plays in the production of midrashic literature. He divides such citation into two forms: paradigmatic and syntagmatic.⁵⁹ He further holds that such citation produces tension “between the meaning(s) of the quoted text in its ‘original’ context and in its present context.”⁶⁰ Such tension is an engine of interpretation. The two texts, in short, must be allowed to interpret one another. What is true with regard to one text is potentially true with regard to the other. While the passage from Isaiah has absolutely nothing to do with the story of the Tower of Babel in its original context, Yehuda’s citation of the passage from Isaiah brings with it another implication concerning the generation of the dispersion in its hermeneutical wake. In its original context, the Isaian passage is part of a critique of the practice of using images in worship (idol worship) in Babylonian religion. People who bow down and worship that which they have created with their own hands are considered blind and must be unable to comprehend the foolishness of their actions. The passage from Isaiah is re-signified by the midrash to relate not to its original context but to a large portion of the Primeval History in Genesis 1–11. The Primeval period is pictured, according to this re-contextualization, as a time of human moral ignorance and continuous rebellion against the divine. At the same time, the selection of a text originally dealing with *Babylonian* idol-worship is not without consequence. If the original context of the quote from Isaiah is a polemic on the part of the prophet against the futility of worshipping idols, its citation with regard to Gen 11 imports that Babylonian impulse into the primeval period. Yehuda’s juxtaposition of these two texts constructs a *paradigm of idolatry* which is at home in both Isaiah and Genesis. In the process, a larger story or narrative about Babylon/Babel is constructed. This narrative bridges the gap between Primeval History and Exile. The Babylon of Isaiah was marked by idol-worship, so too was the original Babel and its tower. The sin of Babel, however, is not even confined to the actions on the plain of Shinar but reaches back to the generation of the Flood and beyond.

⁵⁹ Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, 26–38. In a paradigmatic approach “verses from the Bible are associated by features in which they are the same or different, that is to say they are substitutable for one another as a type” (26). The other approach draws together a number of verses to produce a new narrative out of the association of such verses.

⁶⁰ Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, 23.

A final midrash utilizes “two years after the Flood” to highlight something beside the Babelites’ inherent moral blindness or foolishness. *Genesis Rabbah* 38.3 locates the sin of Babel in the tower builders’ response to the *graciousness* of God following the Flood. The lesson which should have been learned by the Babelites was that God was gracious in his response to the generation of the Flood. The evidence of such generosity was the very existence of the Babelites themselves. Those who gathered on the plain of Shinar were the direct descendents of Noah and his family, the survivors of the Flood. Yet, in the language of Proverbs, the Babelites “repaid good with evil.” The midrash proceeds by constructing a conversation amongst a number of rabbinic voices concerning the meaning of Prov 17:13. In the process a general theological principle is brought to bear on the interpretation of the Babelites.

ר יוחנן פתח משיב רעה תחת טובה לא תמוש רעה מביתו
אמר ר יוחנן אם קדמך חברך בעדשים קדמנו בבשר למה
שהוא גמל עליך תחלה אמר ר שמעון בר אבא לא סוף דבר משיב רעה
תחת טובה אלא אפלו משיב רעה תחת רעה לא תמוש רעה מביתו
אמר ר אלכסנדר משיב רעה תחת טובה שאמרה תורה כי-תראה חמור
שנאך רבץ תחת משאו וחדלת מעזב לו עזב תעזב עמו עליו הוא אומר
משיב רעה תחת טובה לא תמוש רעה מביתו ר ברכיה פתר קריה בדורות
הללו דור הבול ודור הפלגה דכתיב אחר המבול

Rabbi Yohanan opened: “One who returns evil for good, evil will not withdraw from his house” (Prov 17:13). Rabbi Yohanan said: “If your friend places in front of you lentils, while you place in front of him beef (why should this be)? Because he did something good for you first of all.” R. Shimon b. Abba said, “That is not the entire interpretation: ‘The one who returns evil for good’ (he is punished), but even if one returns evil for evil, ‘evil will not withdraw from his house.’” R. Alexandrai said: “‘One who return evil for good’ the Torah says: ‘When you see the donkey of your enemy lying under its burden and you would neglect helping to lift it up, you must certainly help lift it up’ (Exod 23:5). Concerning this passage, Scripture says: ‘The one who returns evil for good, evil will not withdraw from his house.’” R. Berekhiah interpreted the passage with regard to these generations: the generation of the Flood and the generation of the dispersion, it is written: “two years after the Flood.”

(*Gen. Rab.* 38.3)

If one reading of Babel suggests understandable fear on the part of the tower builders because of the trauma of the Flood, this midrash suggests exactly the opposite. God had, in fact, shown *great kindness* to the Babelites in sparing them from the deluge. Their actions on the plain of Shinar are morally repugnant because the people return evil for good. The tower builders should have been faithful because God had done *good* for them *first*. The quality of the act of kindness (surviving a world-wide cataclysm) does not

factor into calculating the moral debt in which the postdiluvian generation found itself. The element of importance and moral significance is based on which party acted first. A previous small act of kindness is superior to a later act of extravagant generosity (lentils are superior to meat). Translated to the realm of theology, God's acts are always *relatively good* in relation to the actions of his creation simply because those acts came first. Humanity owes something to God and should always respond in gratefulness because of their belated (and created) status.⁶¹ This is what the Babelites fail to do.

The midrash is a bit more complicated, however. Rabbi Shimon b. Abba and R. Alexandrai wish to extend the principle to include returning evil for evil. Alexandrai finds biblical precedent for such an extension in the law of an enemy's donkey in Exod 23:5. Even in those situations where (presumably) no prior good act exists to bring about a moral obligation, the Torah commands that one return good for evil, not evil for evil. Applying this moral rule to the narrative of Babel produces an interesting interpretation. Even if the tower builders could argue that God had perpetrated a great evil against them and that they were therefore justified in responding in a rebellious manner, the Torah itself would forbid such a response. It is not likely that the midrash is claiming that God's actions in the Flood *should be considered* evil from the Babelites perspective. The point of the exercise, however, seems to be rhetorical. If one should return good for an evil act, how much more should the generation of the dispersion have been obedient and faithful to God following his miraculous salvation of their ancestors from universal destruction. And yet, Scripture teaches that "two years after the Flood" the generation of the dispersion began down the road to rebellion.

5.3. *Like Adam*

A final example of the incorrigible nature of the tower builders and of their failure to learn the lesson of the Flood is articulated by R. Berekiyah through an exegesis of Gen 11:5. The biblical text states that God descended to see that "which the sons of men had built." The exegetical problem centers on the reference to the "sons of men." Why does Scripture find it necessary to specify that the builders of Babel were sons of men? Is this not superfluous information?

⁶¹ It is possible that the phrase *אם קדמך חברך בעדשים קדמנו בבשר* is playing with the reference to the Babelites migrating *מִקֵּדִם* in Gen 11:2; although such a reference is exceedingly subtle if it is present.

אשר בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם אָמַר ר' בִּרְכִיָּה וְכִי מָה נֹאמַר בְּנֵי חֲמַרְיָא
אוּ בְנֵי גַמְלִיָּא אֵלָא בְּנוֹי דָּאָדָם קִדְמָאָה מָה אָדָם הִרְאִשׁוֹן אַחֵר כָּל הַטּוֹבָה
שֶׁעָשִׂיתִי עִמּוֹ אָמַר הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה עִמָּדִי כִּךְ שְׁנַתִּים מְדוֹר הַמְּבּוּל עַד הַפְּלָגָה

“Which the sons of men built” R. Berekiah said: For what reason is this said? (Should we think) sons of donkeys or the offspring of camel (built it)? Rather, (the Babelites) are sons of the first human being, Adam. Just as the first human being, after all the good I did for him said ‘The Woman *you* gave me (Gen 3:21)’ so also it is was two years separating the generation of the Flood from the generation of the dispersion. (Gen. Rab. 38.9.2)

The basic hermeneutical principle, once again, is the need to find unique signifying power in every word of Scripture. The biblical reference to the tower builders as “sons of *men*” is not a careless statement at all, but rather is translated by R. Berekiah into Scriptural commentary. It is an attempt to say something essential about the very nature of the Babelites. But what is the precise relationship between the first man and the members of the generation of the dispersion? The previous approach held that both are guilty of being ungrateful to the divine—they “return evil for good” in the language of Proverbs. But the evocation of the narrative of Gen 3, with its focus on not only Adam’s disobedience but his failure to take responsibility for his actions, might also have hermeneutical import for R. Berekiah’s estimation of the Babelites. The moral capacity of the tower builders is portrayed as corrupted to be sure; but this corruption is no different than any other member of the human race. The rebellion at Babel is no different from and ultimately founded upon the same rebellious tendency present in Adam himself. It is this notion of universality which helps to explain a final focus on God’s relationship to the Babelites.

6. *Teshuva at Babel? An Opening to Repentance*

All of the midrashim encountered above have centered on the human characters in the narrative of Babel and attempted to explain God’s reaction in light of their actions, imagined statements or intentions. The final collection of midrashim shifts the focus from questions related to the sin of Babel and explores directly the question of *God’s* response. They explore the very brief statements of God in Gen 11:6–7 that “if, as one people with one language for all of them, this is what they have begun to do, now nothing will be withheld from them from all that they seek to do.” These midrashim treat this statement as part of a larger divine discussion.

One interpretive problem encountered by the exegete—ancient and modern—is how to explain the quick and decisive action taken by God

against the Babelites. Did God provide any warning to the tower builders concerning his displeasure? Did he offer a chance, any opportunity at all, for the masons to put down their trowels and cease their destructive construction? Or did God simply descend, confuse, and scatter without mercy? The concern is compounded by the rabbinic tradition that God had, in fact, offered such an opportunity to the generation of the Flood. "For you gave an extension so that the generation of the Flood might repent, but they did not repent" (שנתת ארכה לדורו של מבול לעשות תשובה ולא עשו) (Mekh. Shirata, 5:38). These are questions which Gen 11 does not explicitly address. They are, however, important theological questions for rabbinic interpreters. A number of midrashim, therefore, locate biblical proof—either from the account of Babel itself or from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible—that "God is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment" (Jonah 4:2–3). The problem was that the Babelites were not particularly interested in *teshuvah*.

The notion of *teshuvah* (תשובה) requires some introduction. Urbach claims that:

[the] term תשובה was coined by the Sages, but the concept it signifies is a cardinal principle of the Biblical legacy—a legacy that is intrinsically full of problems and contradictions in respect of this central theme.⁶²

Despite a canonical text which speaks with more than one voice on the subject of the power of repentance, the concept gained increasing currency in rabbinic literature.⁶³ The ability of the power of repentance to counteract and over-rule the divine attribute of justice—the law of requital—became nearly absolute in some rabbinic texts. Repentance is even granted primordial status according to one early sage (*Gen. Rab.* 1.4.1). If God is generally willing to accept the repentance of the sinner, is there any evidence that the Babelites were given the option to turn from their actions? Yes.

Let us examine first a tradition attributed to R. Abba b. Kahana. Drawing on the presence of the term "now" (עתה) in God's speech in Gen 11:6,

⁶² Urbach, *The Sages*, 462.

⁶³ David Lambert has argued that there is "significant discontinuity between the biblical and rabbinic material, a degree of divergence that had been largely covered up over the years by the thoroughgoing penitential reworking of the Bible and its rituals at the hands of Jewish and Christian interpreters" (David Lambert, "Repentance in Rabbinic Literature: Philological and Anthropological Reflections" [paper presented at the Association of Jewish Studies meeting, Washington D.C., December 2005]). My thanks to Dr. Lambert for making his presentation available.

R. Abba explains that the Torah means to teach us that God had given the people an opening to repentance.

ועתה אמר ר' אבא בר כהנא מלמד לפתח להם
הקדוש ברוך הוא פתח של תשובה היך מה דאת אמר
ועתה ישראל מה יי אלהיך שאל מעמך כי אם ליראה והן אמרין
לא אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא יבצר מהם כל אשר יזמו לאשות
הכרם הזה בשעה שאינו עושה פרות מה בעליו עושים לו
מגממין אותו

“And now” R. Abba b. Kahana said: “This teaches that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, gave them a chance to repent. (Thus) even as (Scripture) says—‘now, Israel, what does the LORD your God seek from you? Only to fear (the LORD your God)’ (Deut 10:12). But the Babelites said ‘No!’ The Holy One, Blessed Be He, said: ‘Nothing will be withheld from them from all that they plan to do’ (Gen 11:6). When a vineyard does not produce fruit, what does the owner do to it? He levels it.”⁶⁴ (*Gen. Rab.* 38.9.4–5)

The main purpose of this midrash is to explain, and perhaps neutralize, the potentially problematic phrase concerning humanity at Babel and its unlimited capacity for actualization. What does it mean for God to claim that humanity is unstoppable? R. Abba b. Kahana addresses the phrase by making it part of a larger conversation between God and the Babelites. The midrash deploys the rabbinic interpretive principle of *gezerah shavah*, encountered above, to connect the Genesis passage with a phrase from Deuteronomy. What function does the word “now” serve in either the passage from Deuteronomy or the account of Babel in Genesis? Absolutely no substantive purpose is served according to the rabbinic principle in question—allowing for the text to be treated as an encoded divine message. The superfluous nature of עתה, therefore, allows the rabbinic exegete to connect these two texts. The next step is to claim that “now” implies repentance in Deuteronomy, and that, therefore, the occurrence of the term in Gen 11:6 must equally imply repentance. Here is biblical proof, recondite perhaps, that God *was willing* to forgive the people and accept their repentance prior to confusing and scattering them. It is only when the Babelites refuse to “fear God” (in the words of Deuteronomy) that they are scattered. The single word “now” in this midrash is made to bear the theological conviction that God always permits an opportunity for repentance.

⁶⁴ A variant of this midrash is located in the *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, Shirata, 5. The text is clear that “this term is in reference only to teshuva” (אין עתה אלא תשובה). The midrash in this instance goes on to connect the term with the narrative of Sodom (Gen 18:19–20).

Yet, the word “now” (עתה) is far from rare in the Hebrew Bible. On what basis does midrashic logic select Deut 10:12 as the intersecting text for understanding God’s speech in Gen 11:5? The continuation of the passage from Deuteronomy, from a rabbinic perspective, refers to a central element of the narrative of Babel. In response to the initial question concerning what God searches for in the people of Israel, the text continues:

Fear Yahweh your God, to walk only in his paths, to love Him, and to serve Yahweh your God with all your heart and soul, keeping Yahweh’s commandments and laws, which I enjoin upon you today, for your good. Mark, the heavens and the highest heavens belong to Yahweh your God, the earth and all that is on it (הֵן לַ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיךָ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְשָׁמַיִם הַשָּׁמַיִם הָאָרֶץ וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר-בָּהּ). (Deut 10:13–14)

The people of Israel are reminded, therefore, that the heavens (a word used three times in Deut 10:14) are restricted territory for humanity. Did God also convey this message to the generation of the dispersion? (To be fair, they are also reminded that the earth belongs to Yahweh.) Is it their failure to heed the divine warning hidden behind the term “now” which leads to their scattering and the confusion of their languages from this perspective? God appears especially concerned in Deuteronomy that his people Israel not make the same mistake as the Babelites.

Rabbi Yehuda attempts to explain the divine characterization of the people as “one people/one language” with regard to repentance. Yehuda constructs an imaginary divine monologue in which the unity of the Babelites is treated as ‘unity before God.’

וַאֲמַר יי הֵן עַם אֶחָד וּשְׂפָה אַחַת לְכֻלָּם
רַי הַיְּהוּדָה אֹמֵר הוּאִיל וְהֵן עַם אֶחָד וּשְׂפָה אַחַת
אִם עוֹשִׂין תְּשׁוּבָה אֲנִי מִקְבֵּלָן

And Yahweh said: “Behold they are one people with one language for all of them.” R. Yehudah said, “Since they are one people and they all have one language, if they repent, I will accept them back.” (Gen. Rab. 38.9.3)

What is the relationship between their linguistic and social uniformity and the divine’s willingness to accept the repentance of the people? Moreover, what is the implication of the divine statement—positive or negative? Is R. Yehuda presenting another example of God’s long-suffering patience? According to this reading, the unity of the people provides the opportunity for their repentance to be acceptable to God. Or, is the statement by the divine intended to explain why God both confused and scattered the Babelites—in order to *close the door of repentance* left open by their unity. Is God, at Babel, attempting to “dull the people’s mind, stop its ears and seal its eyes, lest seeing with its eyes and hearing with its ears, it also grasps with

it mind and turns and heals itself" (Isa 6:10). In one sense, this particular midrash could even be read in dialogue with the midrash discussed above (*Gen. Rab.* 38.6.6) in connection with potentially positive responses to the Babelites. The concept of unity as a restraining force on divine punishment is potentially questioned. The second option presents an ambivalent image of a God who is concerned about justness (unity should restrain divine punishment) but can always find a way to punish justly if he so desires. It should be noted that, from a strictly chronological perspective, God confuses first (Gen 11:7) and only subsequently scatters the Babelites (Gen 11:8). God is concerned that the people not understand one another and lose their unity before he separates them from one another.

A final midrash does not raise the issue of repentance, but rather locates biblical proof of God's long-suffering patience with humanity during the Primeval Period. The poem is attributed to R. Azariah who begins with a particularly rich intersecting text from the book of Jeremiah.

עזריה פתח רפינו את בבל ולא נרפּתָה עֲזֻבִּיהָ וְיִלָּד אִישׁ לְאֶרְצוֹ
רפינו את בבל בדור אנוש ולא נרפּתָה בדור המבול
עֲזֻבִּיהָ וְיִלָּד אִישׁ לְאֶרְצוֹ וַיְהִי כֹל הָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אֶחָד

Rabbi Azariah opened: "We would have healed Babel/Babylon, but she was not healed" (Jer 51:9). "We would have healed Babylon/Babel" refers to the generation of Enosh. "But she was not healed" refers to the generation of the Flood. "Forsake her and let each of us go to our own country." Thus: "Now the whole earth had one language." (*Gen. Rab.* 38.5)

The association of this passage from Jeremiah with Gen 11 makes a great deal of sense from a canonical perspective. The oracle even continues with an invective that "her punishment reaches to heaven (כִּי-נִגַּע אֶל-הַשָּׁמַיִם) (מִשְׁפָּטָהּ), it is as high as the sky" (Jer 51:9). What is the argument of this midrash? It suggests, perhaps, not that repentance was possible at Babel, but that repentance had been offered time and time again in the period leading up to Babel. In this regard, it has much in common with other midrashim which depict the tower account as the final affront of primordial humanity to God. There is, however, some slippage in the meaning, for the entire passage can also be applied solely to the story of Babel itself. Both options are possible. A closer analysis should highlight these two possibilities.

"We would have healed Babylon, but she was not healed. Forsake her. Let each of us go to our own country." R. Azariah's interpretation and application of the passage from Jeremiah is based on a double-voicing of key terms found in the verse and a common rabbinic practice of the atomization of biblical material. First, Azariah is drawing on the double meaning of the term בבל as referencing both Babylon (commonly) and Babel (contextually

in Gen 11). Midrashically re-translated the text would read: “We would have healed Babel, but she was not healed.” This midrash does not present the punishment of the sin of Babel as a foregone conclusion. The divine had good intentions and high hopes for the generation of the dispersion and the generations leading up to her before they all proved unworthy. Additionally, Azariah maps this single verse from Jeremiah onto the larger canvas of the Primeval History through his atomization of the passage. The short verse now stretches out across the early history of humanity and serves as an account of the divine willingness to instruct and heal and forgive a wayward creation. The hermeneutical denouement, however, occurs with the Jeremianic assertion that, because Babel refused to be healed, “let each one go to his own country” (וַיִּגְדֹּף אֱלֹהִים לְאִישׁ לְאֶרְצוֹ). It is this last phrase which allows for a slippage in meaning. This particular verse from Jeremiah is utilized to create greater texture and deeper theological drama in the encounter between a deity who has yearned from the dawn of creation for repentance and an incorrigible people. It is at this point, however, that the interpretation is the most unclear. The final phrase of Jeremiah, “let each one go to his own country” is applied to the *beginning* phrase of the Babel narrative. The intent is not clear. Does Azariah quote the first line of the Babel account simply to point us to the larger story—including the punishment and dispersion? One interpretation of the midrash might hold that the Babelites, as such, received no opportunity to repent because they should have learned from the generations who came before them. This interpretation would be in line with the midrashim discussed above. It is equally possible to hold that the association of the Jeremianic passage with the account of Babel in ancient Jewish interpretive circles was also intended to highlight the divine’s willingness to extend repentance even to the generation of the dispersion. The passage from Jeremiah could be applied in multiple ways, in various theological contexts, to the narrative of the tower.

7. Conclusion

The narrative of the Tower of Babel is presented in numerous ways in the rabbinic traditions contained in *Genesis Rabbah*. Some interpreters were willing to locate positive attributes amongst the generation of the dispersion in their desire to hold to a consistent view of the fairness and justness of God. Other rabbinic voices were more concerned with highlighting the precise nature of the sin of Babel or placing the actions of the Babelites into some larger paradigm for how God related to the earliest generations of humanity.

A final collection of midrashim focus less on the human element of the Babel narrative. They attempt to locate the theological truths of rabbinic Judaism concerning the justice and forgiveness of God in the narrative of Babel or in other biblical passages which conceivably pointed towards Babel. In all of these cases, however, the exegetical activity taking place was at the service of and for the benefit of larger notions about the nature of humanity, Israel and their relationship to the God. There could be no doubt that God was just in all of his ways. It was the work of the rabbis responsible for the production and redaction of the traditions contained in *Genesis Rabbah* to demonstrate this truth in their translations of the tower.

CONCLUSION

... *Ofelix peccatum Babel.*

It is difficult to imagine that any ancient Jewish interpreter could have referred to the sin of Babel as 'happy' or even fortunate. The biblical account of Babel, however, was exceedingly useful to such interpreters. The excessive ambiguity of the narrative allowed for its exegetical manipulation by later readers; the tower could easily be re-constructed with each passing era to speak in a new voice to the ever-changing problems and possibilities encountered by Israel. Given that the Tower of Babel was concerned with an abortive attempt at the formation of community, it is not surprising if an increasingly fragmented Jewish community saw a reflection of their contemporary challenges in the narrative.

That many of the translations of the tower examined in this study were composed during formative moments in Jewish antiquity does not seem to be by chance. The narrative of Babel occupies a liminal position within the biblical canon and its construction of Israel's place in the larger world; Babel is the last moment, the final act, before the genesis of the elect. It is unsurprising that such a story, deeply implicated in the origins and election of Israel, might be experienced as pressing or even prophetic in precisely those moments when the notion of 'Israel' and its continued existence are most acutely experienced. The translations of the tower surveyed here have reflected the concerns and questions of their times. The interpretation taking place is two-fold, however. Ancient Jewish readers are certainly applying historically and theologically conditioned hermeneutical principles to the narrative of Babel in their translations of the tower. They are acting as interpretive 'subject' upon the biblical 'object.' Simultaneously, in every instance, the narrative of Babel is also the interpretive 'subject' itself. At the risk of overly personifying the text, the narrative becomes a 'subject'—perhaps a lense—utilized to interpret Israel in a changing historical and theological reality. Ancient Jews interpret Babel; Babel is the means to interpret ancient Judaism. Such dual-interpretation takes a number of forms.

Jubilees issues a passionate plea for a return to *the* ancestral ways in light of the spread of a new hegemonic culture which sought a world in which all peoples spoke "one language." Israel's vocation and identity are marked by

their ability to read and transmit the *language of revelation* (Hebrew) from one generation to the next. Babel does not concern the multiplication of languages, but the restriction of sacred language.

Pseudo-Philo, reading Babel in light of another hegemonic power (Rome), saw a narrative that echoed throughout the remainder of the history of Israel; the reverberations of Babel grew increasingly strong in his own time. He called for a foolish faithfulness which refused to compromise with the wishes of the “nations” and their desires for peace and unity and identified such faithfulness as the original virtue of Israel. Intuiting an historical analogy between the oppression of Babel and the imperialism of Rome, between the careful calculation and manipulation of Joktan and the “leaders” of his own day, Pseudo-Philo held that analogous situations require a similar response of faithfulness on the part of Israel. Babel is translated as a recurrent possibility of Israel’s reality amongst the nations. Babel serves as a narrative-template by which to understand and interpret the on-going reality of Israel-in-conflict.

Looking back at the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, Josephus translates Babel as a warning against the self-destructive anxiety embodied by the biblical notice that the Babelites feared being “scattered across the face of the earth.” He presents the human drive for unity and peace as illusory and cautions a recently dispersed Israel to see in their current national tragedy the guiding and gracious hand of the deity. This new exile could—against all appearances—be for their ultimate good.

Other translations of the tower—born of the ‘dispersion’ itself—sought a less direct correlation between the narrative of Babel and specifically *Jewish* identity. Babel could be viewed as an abstract object lesson concerning the justness and ultimate vindication of the righteous over their wicked oppressors. In 3 (*Greek*) Baruch, the moral order of the universe was carved into the heavens by the transformed builders of the tower.

In the work of Philo of Alexandria, the narrative of Babel attains its philosophical zenith and is translated in the most abstract and universalizing language. The human soul itself is the proper context for understanding the “symphonic” intentions of the Babelites. The lesson of the tower does not apply to any one, contingent moment in history; it applies to every moment. It does not apply only to Israel, but to every human soul who seeks truth. This inner-tower is always being built up and torn down. Such a universal argument is made on the firm (and particular) foundation of Scripture, however.

The rabbinic Babels of *Genesis Rabbah* betray less concern with the message that Babel had to convey about *Israel* and her place in the world than did the Second Temple works. The narrative of Babel itself was a *threat to*

God. It was, at least, a threat to cherished rabbinic notions of God as absolutely fair and just. Babel cast the long shadow of theodicy. The translations of the tower presented by the rabbinic tradition, therefore, attempt to construe an image of Babel which allows for the continuous doxology that God is just in all his ways. Such a concern led to a highly pluralistic field of interpretations as the midrash attempted to compose from the bricks of Babel an (un)systematic theology.

This work has sought to demonstrate a rather simple and basic truth, albeit from a multitude of perspectives. By exploring the manifold interpretive voices of ancient Jewish readers, I have argued that interpretation is a historically conditioned and highly contextualized activity. I have also suggested that interpretation is *considerably more* than exegesis. A good translator seeks to do much more than convert a text in a simplistic fashion—word for word. The translated text is simultaneously like its progenitor and irreducibly “other” than the original.

To belabor a metaphor one last time: the exegetical activities of ancient Jewish readers of Scripture are the bricks which are used in the construction of larger works of biblical interpretation. It is true enough that these literary structures could not take form and obtain substance without the exegetical methodologies and assumptions present in Second Temple and rabbinic writings. The proper study of biblical interpretation can not stop, however, with an examination of exegetical technique—important as that field of study may be. An understanding of historical exegetical method is, at best, propaedeutic. One does not grasp the sublime nature and purposes of a medieval cathedral (or any other piece of great architectural work) when one has exhaustively studied their means of production. One is still left with the question of “why” such a new structure should be created and how it fits into and reflects the larger culture in which it resided. The whole is somehow greater than the sum of the parts. There is, in a similar fashion, more to Babel than its bricks. I have attempted to translate this simple fact through my various readings of the narrative of the Tower of Babel in Jewish antiquity.

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